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The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and Influences on International Recognition of Human Rights Organizations in Latin America

By

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Latin American Studies

December 15, 2018

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

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To my parents, Jay and Nancy,

for their endless love and support

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must express my appreciation and gratitude to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. These women were so welcoming during my undergraduate internship experience and their willingness to share their stories will always be appreciated it. My time with the organization was fundamental to my development as a person as an academic. This work would not have been possible without them.

I am grateful everyone in the Center for Latin American Studies, who have all supported me greatly throughout my wonderful five years at Vanderbilt. In particular, I would like to thank Frank Robinson, who not only guided me throughout this project but also helped inspire me to pursue this field of study beginning my freshman year. To Marshall Eakin, thank you for all of your insights and support. Additionally, a thank you to Nicolette Kostiw, who helped advise me throughout my time at Vanderbilt.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, who have supported me unconditionally as I continue to pursue my dreams. I am forever appreciative for their love, encouragement, and enthusiasm for the journeys life has taken me on. I would not have become the person that I am today without them

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	The Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance
AFADEM	The Association of Family Members of Disappeared Detainees and Victims of Human Rights Violations, Mexico
AFDD	The Association of Family Members of Disappeared Detainees, Chile
ASFADDES	The Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared, Colombia
CCD	Clandestine Detention Centers
CEH	The Historical Clarification Committee of Guatemala
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CLAMOR	The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Countries of the Southern Cone
Comadres	The Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated Persons, El Salvador
CONADEP	The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, Argentina
CONAVIGUA	National Coordinating Body of Guatemalan Widows
ERP	The People's Revolutionary Army, Argentina
ESMA	The Navy Mechanics School in Buenos Aires, Argentina
FADEGUA	Association of Family Members of Detained-Disappeared in Guatemala
FEDEFAM	The Latin American Federation of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees
GAM	The Mutual Support Group, Guatemala
IACHR	The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNRG	Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

During the latter half of the twentieth century, countries throughout Latin America experienced periods of dictatorship and authoritarianism with the rise of Cold War tensions and a newly reconfigured National Security Doctrine, which established that it was the duty of the military to protect a nation from internal rather than external security threats. In fact, in 1979, only Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Venezuela had leaders that had been democratically elected.[1] While these regimes attempted to promote political stability, anti-Communist policies, and development through the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms, it often came at the cost of civil rights and liberties. Censorship, torture, and forced disappearances became widespread tactics used by these authoritarian regimes in order to suppress political opposition.

While tactics like torture, censorship and murder have been used by repressive regimes throughout the world for centuries, the use of forced disappearances became emblematic of this period in Latin American history. Forced disappearances were a tactic that had rarely been seen before and brought about much confusion about what it meant for someone to be "disappeared". The use of the word "disappearance" refers to the fact that often times, these people seemed to have simply vanished – there one day and gone the next – with no proof as to whether they had been kidnapped, murdered or fled the country of their own free will. However, as the tactic became more widespread, it became obvious that "disappearances" implied something sinister. For Claus Ruser, a diplomat stationed at the United States Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, disappearances were "a euphemism for the unacknowledged detention of any individual by security

[1] Ramesh Thakur and Jorge Heine, "Human rights and the state in Latin America," in *Human Rights Regimes in the Americas,* ed. Mónica Serrando and Vesselin Popovski (Hong Kong: United Nations University Press, 2010), 120.

forces. Based on everything we know we believe that detainees are usually tortured as part of interrogation and eventually executed without any semblance of due process".[2]

While disappearance became synonymous with torture and extralegal executions, the tactic has important and far reaching effects on both the legal processes available to combat the disappearances, and their effect on the families of the victims. Amnesty International notes that disappearances have significant consequences, regardless of whether a body is ever recovered:

> Sometimes the body is dumped in a public place: it may be found and identified, but the 'disappearance' will have helped to conceal the authors and circumstances of the torture and killing. In other cases bodies are mutilated beyond recognition or disposed of secretly: the 'disappearance' keeps the key facts of the killing hidden, and the fate and whereabouts of the victim remain unknown. 'Disappearance' becomes a cover for extrajudicial execution, and extrajudicial execution perpetuates the state of 'disappearance'.[3]

Once disappeared, it becomes nearly impossible to discover what became of the victims – even if a body was recovered. Questions about where the disappeared were taken, what happened to them while being detained, how they were killed, who killed them, and what happened to the bodies, were often unable to be fully answered, regardless of the pressure exerted on the government to reveal the truth or the size of the conflict.

Disappearances may have been used throughout Latin America in the latter half of the twentieth century, but the number of disappeared varied greatly by country. However, the exact number of disappearances per country is hard to accurately determine given the clandestine nature of the governments' actions. In countries like Brazil, Panama, Bolivia, and Uruguay, it is estimated that only a few hundred people were disappeared; in countries like Argentina, Peru, El Salvador and Guatemala, the numbers are in the tens of thousands.[4] Overall, some estimate that

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[2] Iain Guest, *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War Against Human Rights and the United Nations (*Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 32.
[3] Amnesty International, "*Disappearances" and Political Killings: Human Rights Crisis of the 1990s, A Manual for Action* (Amsterdam: Amnesty International, 1994), 85.
[4] La Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos, "A 34 años de lucha de FEDEFAM y la conmemoración del Día International del Detenido-Desaparecido," *Hasta Encontrarlos, (*August 30, 2015). http://hastaencontrarlos.org/spip.php?article1729.

more than 250,000 people were disappeared in Latin America in a forty-year period from 1960 to 1998.[5]

As a result of the widespread use of forced disappearances and state-sponsored terrorism, various civil society organizations appeared across Latin America in order to protest the governments' actions and demand that the government reveal the true fate of the *desaparecidos*. The Latin American Federation of Associations of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (Spanish: *Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos, FEDEFAM*) recognizes around twenty organizations – primarily composed of family members of the disappeared – from fourteen Latin American countries. In addition to similarities in timing and strategies, the organizations have important commonalities, namely that the organizations "emerged as apolitical grass roots movements led by female relatives of the victims of repression, who took up an organized search for their loved ones, and gradually moved on to more 'political' activities under the banner of human rights".[6] According to Judith Galarza Campos, the Executive Secretary of FEDEFAM, the organization and its subsidiaries are dedicated to "crear conciencia mundial del grave delito que se cometía en el mundo con la práctica de la desaparición forzada".[7] Examples of these organizations include the Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated Persons of El Salvador (Spanish: *Comité de Madres de Reos y Desaparecidos Politicos de El Salvador*, Comadres) in El Salvador, the Association of Family Members of Disappeared Detainees (Spanish: *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos,* AFDD) in Chile, and the Mutual Support Group (Spanish: *Grupo de Apoyo*

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Mariclaire Acosta, "The Comadres of El Salvador: A Case Study," in *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children & Human Rights in Latin America,* ed. Marjorie Agosin and Monica Bruno (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1993), 128.

[7] Mario Ayala, "FEDEFAM: 30 años de lucha contra la desaparición forzada, 1981-2011. (Entrevista con Judith Garlaza Campos. Caracas. Venezuela, abril de 2011)," *Aletheia* 2, no. 3 (November 2011). http://www.aletheia.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/numeros/numero-3/fedefam-30-anos-de-lucha-contra-la-desaparicion-forzada-1981-2011.-entrevista-con-judith-galarza-campos.-caracas.-venezuela-abril-de-2011.

Mútuo, GAM) in Guatemala. However, the most well-known organizations are the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (*Spanish: las Madres de Plaza de Mayo y las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo)* in Argentina.

The Mothers and the Grandmothers originally began as the same organization, consisting of the mothers of the disappeared who gathered in front of the Argentine Presidential Palace, the Casa Rosada, in the Plaza de Mayo in order to demand answers about what happened to their children, and in some cases, their grandchildren. Their efforts gained the attention not only of other Argentines, but also the international community. The organizations were quickly recognized by Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the U.S. Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. Since their establishment in 1977, the Madres and Abuelas have gained international celebrity and been recognized with many awards including the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights, the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize, and in May 2018, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo were nominated for the sixth time for the Nobel Peace Prize.[8]

The ability of the Mothers and Grandmothers to generate support both nationally and internationally is impressive but it does raise questions. FEDEFAM recognizes nearly twenty organizations of family members of the disappeared that all share similar characteristics and goals, and all were created at roughly the same time period. So why is it that the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina have been so successful on the national and international level while the other similar organizations in the region have failed to have the same

[8]"Announcement of the Awardees of the 2003 United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights," *United Nations General Assembly,* December 2, 2003, http://www.un.org/ga/president/58/speeches/031202-2.htm; European Parliament, *Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought* (Luxemborg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2006), 12; UNESCO, "Argentina's Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo awarded UNESCO Peace Prize," *UN News,* March 4, 2011, https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/03/368142-argentinas-grandmothers-plaza-de-mayo-awarded-unesco-peace-prize; "Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo otra vez candidatas al Nobel de la Paz," *El Clarín,* May 28, 2018, https://www.clarin.com/politica/abuelas-plaza-mayo-vez-candidatas-nobel-paz_0_Hkiy1kQ17.html.

results?

One of the most obvious potential answers would be to look at the relationship between the organizations and the number of *desaparecidos* in that country. With an estimated thirty thousand disappearances, FEDEFAM estimates that Argentina had one of the highest numbers of disappeared in Latin America, with only Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico experiencing higher levels of disappearances in the period from 1960 to 1998.[9] And yet the organizations of the disappeared that exist in these countries – the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared (ASFADDES), GAM, and the Association of Family Members of Disappeared Detainees and Victims of Human Rights Violations (AFADEM) respectively – have failed to obtain the same level of recognition as the Madres and Abuelas. While the number of disappeared in each country undoubtedly plays a role in the organizations' membership and visibility, the lack of a concrete correlation between the number of disappeared and the organizations' recognition indicates that the reason for the success of the Argentine case cannot solely be attributed to the size of the conflict.

In attempting to identify factors that contributed to the uniqueness of the Mothers and Grandmothers, this essay analyzes interviews with members of Latin American organizations of the disappeared, conducted personally in the case of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the AFDD in Chile, as well as records of interviews. Given that many of these organizations are shrinking in size as their members grow old and are no longer able to participate, the records of the interviews provide information about the participants' experiences. The personal interviews facilitated the identification of potential factors that influenced the ability of the Mothers and Grandmothers to emerge as the iconic Latin American organization of the disappeared. Additionally, these interviews proved to be invaluable, allowing me to confirm

[9] La Federación, "A 34 años de lucha."

hypotheses about how male exclusion and the Falklands War inadvertently aided the Mothers' mission while also providing unexpected insights about the members' thoughts on the issue, including their suspicions about the significance of US interventionism and the organizations' internal divisions. Using this information, this essay will approach the question of the Mothers and Grandmothers' uniqueness through a historical narrative, first establishing the history of the organizations as it is traditionally understood before delving into how gender and feminism, political actions, and outside actors affected the rise of the organizations on the international level.

In order to understand the reasons that the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo rose to international celebrity while other Latin American organizations faced relative anonymity, it is first necessary to understand the history and development of the organizations themselves. As such, we begin in Chapter 2 by analyzing the historical developments of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The discussion is organized chronologically, beginning prior to the 1976 military coup that deposed President Isabel Perón and established the National Reorganization Process. The tensions that emerged during this period are directly related to the campaigns against subversion, the occurrence of the first disappearances, and the group's establishment in April of 1977. We then trace the development of the organization, from its initial appearances in the Plaza and struggles with government repression, to its split into the three different factions of the original organization, and finally, to the country's return to democracy and the organizations' present-day status. Each stage of the organizations' progression represents a moment in which the Madres and Abuelas would gain more attention from the international community, contributing to their unique status among the Latin American organizations of the disappeared.

Chapter 3 focuses on how gender and feminism contributed to the success of the Mothers and Grandmothers. Before focusing on the ways that the Argentine organizations took advantage

of feminism and gender, I first address the inequalities in feminist movements that existed in Latin America prior to the beginning of the Argentine military dictatorship. Because there was no homogeneous form of feminism in Latin America at the time, the feminism that emerges in Argentina is unique, facilitating the creation of a unique form of feminism in Argentina that idealized mothers and maternal figures. In this atmosphere, the actions of the Mothers and Grandmothers in creating an exclusively-female organization that simultaneously plays into and subverts traditional gender roles set the Madres apart from other organizations of the disappeared in Latin America, regarding both the power that was available to these women as well as the image these organizations presented to the international community.

While most, if not all, of the organizations in FEDEFAM including the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, began with the sole purpose of finding their disappeared loved ones and were not created with a political agenda, these organizations are inherently political. As such, it is important to analyze the political actions and implications of the Mothers in order to identify those factors that increased the efficacy of the organization's mission. Chapter 4 addresses the political nature of the Mothers first by examining the importance of the Plaza de Mayo itself. Situated directly in front of the Argentine Presidential Palace, the decision to gather in this location touches not only on the political importance of the Plaza de Mayo but also the importance of urbanization in facilitating the women's political actions. We then consider the organizations as they increasingly act as a political organization, establishing codes and hidden messages in order to avoid government repression and bypass censorship measures. The Mothers cement their status as a political organization with the official division of the organization in 1986. Finally, I examine how the Mothers were able to take advantage of their political power during the trials that occurred in the years after the country returned to democracy.

The final chapter analyzes how outside actors affected the success of the Argentine case,

although in inadvertent ways. First, we start with the role of the Catholic Church. In contrast with other Latin American countries like Chile and El Salvador, the Catholic Church provided little aid to the Mothers and Grandmothers in their search for the *desaparecidos.* While this had mixed results, ultimately, it contributed to the visibility of the organization. Second, we look at how Argentina's involvement in the Falklands War internationalized events in Argentina during the military dictatorship, bringing international attention not only to the war, but also to the human rights violations that had occurred and organizations like the Mothers that were fighting against them. Third, I postulate that differences in the intensity of US interventionism in the region affected the United States' ability to recognize organizations of the disappeared. US intervention in Argentina was not as direct or intense as it was in other Latin American countries, facilitating the US' ability to recognize the Mothers and Grandmothers without worrying about how their recognition of the disappearances might reflect poorly on the United States.

CHAPTER 2

A Brief History of Argentine Case

In order to understand why the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo emerged as the most well recognized organization of the disappeared in Latin America, it is important to understand the development of the organization. The characteristics of the Argentine case helped define the size of the organization, the strategies they would employ and the interactions they would have with the national government and the international community. This chapter provides an overview of the history of the military dictatorship, the disappeared and the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In particular, this chapter focuses on some of the key events for the organization, including the donning of the white handkerchiefs and the internal divisions within the organization, among others, that will emerge as important factors that enabled the Mothers to stand out on the international level.

2.1 The Beginnings of the Military Dictatorship

Prior to the 1976 military coup, tensions between the government, civil society groups, and military officials were increasing. Political instability was rampant from 1966 to 1973 during a period known as the Argentina Revolution, and political organizations fought against one another for power. Groups like the People's Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo,* ERP), the Montoneros (*Movimiento Peronista Montonero)*, and the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (*Alianza Anticomunista Argentina,* AAA) participated in guerrilla and insurgent warfare, resulting in extralegal killings of politicians, car bombings and infamously, the Ezeiza Massacre. On June 20, 1973, 13 were killed and 365 injured when police opened fire upon a crowd of over two million who had gathered at the Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires for the

return of Juan Perón after his 18-year exile to Spain.[10] In the aftermath of the resignation of President Héctor Cámpora and Vice President Vicente Solano Lima, Juan Perón was able to take advantage of the special elections and was reelected president, beginning his term in October 1973. Unfortunately, Juan Perón died less than a year later in July 1974, and tensions erupted as Isabel Perón replaced him as president.[11] Juan Perón's death left a power vacuum in which factions of military officials began campaigns against subversive forces in more rural areas of Argentina, like the northwest state of Tucuman, in an attempt to gain power.[12] Between May of 1973 and March of 1976, there were nearly three thousand deaths between leftist militants and military officials.[13] This political violence combined with economic turmoil, skyrocketing inflation, and growing discontent in the public made the possibility of military action seem inevitable.[14]

On March 24, 1976, a military coup led by Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Massera and Brigadier-General Orlando Agosti overthrew President Isabel Peron in order to install themselves as the leaders of the so-called National Reorganization Process (*El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional,* or *El Proceso)*. Schools closed, the airport was shut down, television and radio programs were interrupted, and Argentina's National Congress, government buildings, and labor union organizations were occupied by military personnel.[15] The military junta turned to radio and press organizations like the newspaper *La Nación* to disseminate information about the new regime. On March 25, 1976, the front page of *La Nación* announced not only the military generals' rise to power, but also wrote about the basic objectives of *El Proceso*. Among these objectives was the goal to ensure national security through the eradication of

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[10] Julieta Rostica, "About the Triple A. Argentina 1973 – 1976," *Desafíos* 23, no. 2 (2011): 32.
[11] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 18.
[12] Daniel K Lewis, *The History of Argentina* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 143.
[13] Jerry Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America (*Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 79.
[14] Lewis, *The History of Argentina,* 142.
[15] Juan de Onis, "Argentina Rulers Name Videla Junta President," *New York Times,* March 27, 1976, 4.

subversion and the forces that contribute to its existence.[16]

However, the concept of "subversion" was broadly defined by military officials. Rather than having a narrow focus on members of the AAA, the Montoneros or the ERP that engaged in terroristic activity, subversion was defined as "un enemigo social, político e ideológico con muchos rostros y brazos, que actuaba en distintos terrenos y con variadas formas organizativas y métodos".[17] Under Videla's definition of subversion as not only "alguien con una pistola o una bomba, sino también aquel que propaga ideas contrarias a la civilización occidental y cristiana", thousands of people were accused of being subversive, including university students and intellectuals that often had no ties to militant groups.[18] One example of how expansive the definition of subversion was occurred on September 16, 1976. Known as the Night of the Pencils, ten schoolchildren were apprehended by government officials – three were killed and the rest were tortured with cattle prods and beaten for their involvement in subversive activities, namely singing a petition for reduced bus fare for students.[19] Under this broad definition of subversion, Argentine officials would begin a huge campaign to eradicate anyone it saw as subversive.

In order to ensure their national security goals and eliminate the threats presented by subversives, military officials throughout Argentina adopted radical positions on the government's involvement in the violence. Lieutenant General Jorge Videla was selected as President on March 29, 1976 and he took a hardline stance towards national security, stating "As many persons as necessary will have to die to achieve the country's [Argentina's] security".[20] Other officials were

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[16] La Junta Militar de la República de Argentina, *Documentos Básicos de las Fuerzas Armadas para el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Buenos Aires: El Congreso de la Nación, 1980), 7.
[17] Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, *La Dictadura Militar 1976/1983: Del Golpe de Estado a la Restauración Democrática,* Historia Argentina Volume 9 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 2013), 83.
[18] María Soledad Catoggio, "Tiempos violentos: catolicismo y dictadura en la Argentina de los años setenta" in *Las Iglesias Ante la Violencia en América Latina: Los derechos humanos en el pasado y el presente,* ed. Alexander Wilde (Mexico City: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2015), 216.
[19] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 31.
[20] Thomas C. Wright, *State Terrorism in Latin America, Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights (*Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 87.

more explicit in the strategies they believed were needed to decrease subversive activity. According to General Ibérico Saint Jean, the governor of the Province of Buenos Aires from 1976 to 1981 notoriously declared, "First we kill all the subversives, then we kill their collaborators, then… their sympathizers, then… those that remain indifferent; and, finally, we kill the timid".[21] With this mindset in place, the government began a campaign of state terrorism to eliminate political opponents and bolster the country's national security doctrine.

2.2 The Disappeared in Argentina

This period of state terrorism came at a great cost to the Argentine populace. Between 1975 and 1983, the government arrested, tortured, disappeared and extralegally murdered tens of thousands of Argentines, both those involved in militant activities like the ERP and Montoneros, as well as innocent civilians. While the exact numbers are hard to pin down, the official number of forced disappearances as determined by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, CONADEP)* rests at 8,960.[22] This is generally accepted to drastically underestimate the number of disappeared as more conservative estimates place the number around 15,000 and others speculate the number is closer to 30,000.[23] Ramón Campos, the chief of police of the Province of Buenos Aires during the dictatorship, estimated that the number of disappeared could be as high as 45,000.[24]

In addition to the thousands of disappeared adults, the government also became involved in the appropriation of children. Known as the *desparecidos con vida,* or the 'living disappeared', the appropriation of children refers to children who were disappeared together with their parents

[21] Ibid., 107.
[22] *Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas, (*Buenos Aires: Eudeba, University of Buenos Aires, 1984), 16.
[23] Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America,* 118; Guzman Bouvard, Marguerite. *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. (*Lanham, MD: S.R. Books, 1994), chap. 1.
[24] Guzman, *Revolutionizing Motherhood,* chap. 1.

or those who were born while their mother was detained.[25] The CONADEP lists 172 confirmed cases in which children were disappeared at the same time as at least one parent, however, others estimate the number of children appropriated by the government to be closer to 500.[26] One explanation behind this variation is that in some cases, pregnant women were kidnapped by military officials and held in maternity wards until they gave birth, at which point the child would be taken and re-homed through illegal adoptions or given to government families.[27] However, the exact number of appropriated children is hard to determine as it is hard to determine whether these pregnant women were able to give birth or not.

While there is no one standard experience for what happened to a disappeared person after being kidnapped, there are several trends that are important as they affected the way in which human rights organizations mobilized. In general, clandestine detention centers (*centros clandestinos de detención, CCD)* were widely used. CONADEP confirmed the existence of 340 CCDs spread throughout Argentina while a report by the United Nations in 2006 revised that number to 488, with 65 additional locations still under investigation.[28] Survivors of these centers describe being electrocuted with cattle prods, burned with cigarettes, starved, beaten, and sexually assaulted until they gave up the names of their loved ones and associates.[29] Some prisoners were held for months before being released. Others would never reappear.

Some of those killed were able to be identified. Mutilated bodies were sent to city morgues and corpses were found in fields or graves marked "N.N." for *Ningún Nombre*, or No Name.[30]

[25] Rita Arditti, *Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 51.
[26] *Nunca Más,* 299.
[27] Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America,* 119-120.
[28] *Nunca Más*, 55; Lucio Fernández Moores, "Un Relevamiento de la Secretaria de Derechos Humanos para las Naciones Unidas," *Clarín*, March 24, 2006, http://servicios2.abc.gov.ar/docentes/efemerides/24marzo/htmls/conceptos/descargas/centrosclandestinos.pdf.
[29] "Statement by anonymous U.S. citizen on being subjected to atrocious torture," National Security Archive. Electronic Briefing Book 73, Part 1, October 4, 1976.
[30] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 26-27.

However, the most notorious disappearances occurred at the ex-Naval Mechanics School, known as the ESMA. Located on the coast in the city of Buenos Aires, prisoners at the ESMA were often killed in the Death Flights *(Vuelos de la Muerte)*. Prisoners would be loaded onto planes – sometimes fully conscious, sometimes drugged with sodium pentothal – and thrown out over the Río de la Plata or the Atlantic where their bodies would either sink, never to be found, or parts of decomposing bodies would wash ashore along the coast.[31] This system of detainment and torture would be important with the appearance of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as the knowledge of their existence and the methods used to dispose of the bodies would shape the way they strategized and acted.

2.3 The Founding of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

As more and more people were disappeared, an increasing number of family members were left worrying about the fate of their loved ones. Some had been told by witnesses that their loved one had been kidnapped. A few had been taken with their loved ones, only to be released later while the others remained detained. Others had just seemingly vanished. Many began by checking hospitals and police stations. When that did not work, many attempted to file a writ of *habeas corpus*, a legal document that mandates that agency bring the person in question to court and to justify said person's detention. People throughout Argentina turned to *habeas corpus* requests in an attempt to confirm the location and status of a family members. According to some reports "Between 1976 and 1979, judges received at least 5,487 submissions for *habeas corpus* in Buenos Aires alone. Not one resulted in a serious investigation".[32] Attempts to find answers through other organizations, like the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, the Center for Legal and Social, and the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights, also failed to help. It was while waiting in the lines outside of these offices that many of the women share their stories with

[31] Ibid., 42.
[32] Ibid., 26.

one another and arrange meetings together.[33] With traditional legal channels blocked, some saw public denouncements of the government's actions as their only option.

Pepa Noia, a member of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo – Founding Line recalls the moment that fourteen mothers with disappeared children decided to take their quest for truth to the Plaza de Mayo:

> Había que tener coraje para hablar ahí. Azucena lo dijo fuerte, no al oído. Ella dijo más o menos así: 'Yo quisiera decirles que nosotros lo que tenemos que hacer es ir a la Plaza de Mayo, como hicieron nuestros mayores'. Todos empezaron a deliberar qué día podía ser, y un familiar sacó un almanaque chiquito y eligió el 30 de abril. Pero la idea, quiero subrayar eso, fue de Azucena Villaflor.[34]

And so, as a result of Azucena Villaflor's suggestion, on Saturday April 30, 1977, the group of fourteen mothers gathered in front of the Casa Rosada in the Plaza de Mayo. But, being a Saturday, the Casa Rosada, Argentina's presidential palace, and the surrounding businesses were closed, and the Plaza was nearly empty. The women would meet in the Plaza on different days, first that Saturday, then a Friday, and then a Tuesday, but nothing seemed to be working.[35] After further discussion, Villaflor decided it would be best to organize the reunion of the mothers at a time when people would be walking throughout the plaza. The women agreed to meet on Thursday at 3:30 p.m. and from that moment until the present day, the Madres have continued to march in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday.

At first, the meetings in the Plaza de Mayo went relatively unnoticed. But, as more and more women became involved, the gatherings came under scrutiny as military law prohibited organizations as groups of three or more.[36] In response, the mothers would link arms and walk two-by-two around the pyramid at the center of the Plaza de Mayo, thus circumventing the laws in place.

[33] Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood,* chap. 3.
[34] Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo – Línea Fundadora, *Las Viejas: Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora cuentan una historia (*Buenos Aires: Marea Editorial, 2014), 52.
[35] Ibid., 54.
[36] Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood,* chap. 3.

Gradually, more and more women joined the movement. Hundreds of women marched in the plaza every Thursday despite growing police presence, threats and even arrests. While the organization was becoming more established every day, building networks and attempting to gather information about the disappeared, the group lacked a cohesive and simple way to identify themselves and make themselves more noticeable to the public. This all changed during a procession to Luján, a small city roughly forty miles outside the city of Buenos Aires.

2.4 The Madres Don White Handkerchiefs

In September 1977, just a few months after the founding of the Madres, a pilgrimage was being organized from the city of Buenos Aires to the small city of Luján. This city, known as the Capital of Faith, is famous for housing a small statue of the Virgin of Luján, the patron saint of Argentina. Every year, believers walk forty miles from Buenos Aires to Luján in order to pray to the virgin, who is believed to produce miracles. The procession provided an opportunity for the mothers to walk and talk without fear of government oversight. However, one of the biggest issues that appeared was how to identify each other in a crowd of thousands. Previously, the women had worn small pieces to signify their grief and solidarity on the lapels of their shirts. But these pieces would be impossible to note from far away. So, the mothers needed another solution.

At first, the Mothers could not identify a solution. According to María del Rosario Cerruti, the Madres originally considered making wooden crosses, approximately one foot in length and carrying them during the journey to Luján.[37] But the cross was not easily identifiable, especially from a distance. Another suggested that they carry tall branches, but this too proved to be ineffective.[38] The easiest solution was to use something that was both indicative of motherhood and also readily available. According to one member of the organization, the *pañuelo*, translated as a

[37] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 75.
[38] Ibid.

diaper or handkerchief, was one of the simplest options:

> Cómo nos encontráramos nosotras? No había una forma. Entonces, decidimos, como éramos madres, ya éramos abuelas, pero quedamos madres. Quién no tenía algún pañuelo? Yo no tenía. La verdad. Y compré un pedazo de tela y la corté así. Y me puse ese pañuelo para encontrarnos. Eran multitudes de peregrinos. Y ahí nos encontramos. Y nos fuimos juntando.[39]

So, that September, the mothers donned white handkerchiefs on their heads and met up with each other as they marched to Luján. As more and more gathered together, they began to attract more attention among other members of the procession. The women had planned to attend mass, take communion, and pray collectively for their disappeared loved ones upon arriving at the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján. However, Archbishop Juan Carlos Aramburu made this impossible. According to Haydée Buela, the Madres had originally planned to announce that their procession to Luján was "Por mi hijo desaparecido" while taking communion, but when Aramburu realized that all the women wearing white handkerchiefs would do so, he ordered all church officials to deny them communion.[40]

Despite their inability to take communion, the pilgrimage to Luján and the handkerchiefs proved to be successful. Whenever the women were approached, the Madres shared that they wore the handkerchiefs for their missing children and they were traveling to Luján to pray for their return. As more and more people began to notice and talk to the mothers about the handkerchief and their purpose, the Madres realized the potential that the handkerchief had in helping them to stand out and create an image for themselves. And with that, the handkerchief was adopted as a unifying symbol of the organization.

2.5 Backlash and Repression

Over the next few months, the Madres would continue to gain members and recognition among the public. However, not all the recognition was desirable. As the women began to attract

[39] "Interview with a member of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (1), Interview by Catherine Paige Southworth, June 5, 2018.
[40] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 78.

attention, the junta focused in on their activities. Their efforts in the Plaza and the growth of the organization endangered the reputation of the dictatorship and threatened to expose the extralegal detentions. In response, military officials plotted to intervene with the organization's activities in the hopes that it might scare them into submission.

For months, members of the Madres had met with church officials and others at the Church of the Holy Cross in Buenos Aires. In addition to attending mass, the women comforted one another and plotted potential ways to find out information about their disappeared loved ones. By December 1977, the women had come up with a plan to publish a list of the names of all known disappeared people in one of the national newspapers, although sources are unclear whether the article was to be published in *La Prensa* or in *La Nación.*[41] The publication was signed by 230 people, including a man known as Gustavo Niño.[42] However, in reality, Niño was an imposter; a military official named Alfredo Astiz who worked in the ESMA.

Astiz had approached the members of the Madres, presenting false information that seemed to prove that he was a man named Gustavo Niño whose brother had been disappeared. After infiltrating the Madres and documenting their supposedly subversive activities, Astiz arranged for the government to intervene. On December 8, 1977, government forces descended on the Church of the Holy Cross and kidnapped fourteen people working with the Madres, among them Esther Ballestrino, María Ponce de Bianco and two French nuns.[43] Two days later, Azucena Villaflor, the leader of the Madres who had been absent at the time of the Holy Cross kidnappings was picked up from her home by military forces and taken to the ESMA.[44] Ironically, her disappearance coincided with Human Rights Day.

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[41] Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, *La Historia de Abuelas: 30 Años de Búsqueda (*Buenos Aires: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 2007), 22; Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 59.
[42] Las Abuelas, *La Historia de Abuelas,* 22.
[43] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 59-60.
[44] Ibid*.*, 60.

In the days after the disappearances of Azucena Villaflor and the women at the Holy Cross, the Madres were in turmoil. Many were afraid to continue participating. Some refused to come to the Plaza. But according to Haydée Buela, an important realization emerged in the aftermath of the disappearances:

> La desaparición de Azucena nos marcó. Razonamos, y cada una también pensó por sí, que no se llevaron a nadie de la Asamblea [la Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos], no se llevaron a nadie del CELS [Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales], no se llevaron a nadie de todas las instituciones de derechos humanos que existían. ¿A quién se llevaron? A las madres, fundamental, y a ese grupo que estaba trabajando con las madres en la Santa Cruz. Es decir, eso era lo que realmente les molestaba, esa marcha silenciosa de reclamo. Era lo que les molestaba más que todo lo que existía. Entonces no dimos cuenta de que eso era lo más importante que teníamos que plantar.[45]

The realization that the Madres were the only organization being targeted by government officials was important in that it solidified the strategies being used. The government's actions meant they were afraid of the potential that the Madres had and felt repression was the only solution. This new understanding would bolster the Madres efforts in the years that came, furthering their dedication to the marches in the plaza and their public denunciations.

Unfortunately, this realization did come at a cost. All the women kidnapped on December 8 and 10 were later killed. Only some of the bodies would be found after washing ashore on the coast of Uruguay. In addition to these disappearances, the Madres would continue to face repression from the government. Women would be arrested during the marches in the plaza. Others would be threatened. Despite these efforts, the Madres would only become more resilient, strengthening their position against the government and escalating their activities.

2.6 The First Division: The Formation of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo

While the adoption of the handkerchief and their struggles in the Plaza de Mayo gave the appearance of a unified organization, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo would soon realize that the organization as not as cohesive as originally imagined. The women came from highly different

[45] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 104.

backgrounds, with different socioeconomic statuses, education levels and religious beliefs. And most importantly with regards to the initial division among the Madres, some women were searching not only for their missing children, but also their missing grandchildren.

Among the thousands of people disappeared by the government, hundreds of young children and pregnant women who presumably gave birth while detained had also been disappeared. At first, the matriarchs of these families did not realize the scale of the appropriation of children in Argentina. But as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo grew larger and the women began to share their stories with one another, these matriarchs began to look for other women in a similar situation. One Thursday in 1977, a member of the Madres stood apart from the other women and asked "Quién está buscando a su nieto, o tiene a su hija o nuera embarazada?"[46] Eleven others would come forward and these twelve women would come to organize what was originally known as the Argentine Grandmothers with Disappeared Grandchildren (*Abuelas Argentinas con Nietitos Desaparecidos)*, but later adopted the name, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo).

At the very beginning, there was the slightest of pushback from the members of the Madres. Some were concerned that the addition of the search for the grandchildren would detract attention away from the search for the children. Raquel Radío de Marizcurrena recalls the initial worries that some members had:

> They said that if we wanted a plaza we could go to another plaza, the Plaza del Congreso, that the Plaza de Mayo was the plaza of the Mothers. But it was only two of them, and it happened only once. So we kept going to the Plaza de Mayo. I think what happened is that they thought we wanted to divide things. That because we were looking for our grandchildren we were abandoning our children. But that was not the case, we never forgot our children.[47]

So, the Abuelas continued to march in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday and they continued to

[46] Las Abuelas, *La Historia de Abuelas*, 18.
[47] Arditti, *Searching for Life,* 55.

demand answers for the disappearance of their children. In many cases, the members of the Abuelas were also members of the Madres. And because they continued to participate in the marches the Plaza de Mayo alongside the Mothers, it was not always easy to distinguish the members of the Grandmothers from the members of the Mothers.

However, as part of the Abuelas, they began to organize tasks and goals unique to their organizations. The Grandmothers attempted to gain information about what happened to their grandchildren, building almost spy-like networks where the women would pretend to be nannies or teachers and would show up at schools or orphanages to look for the missing children.[48] Through these investigations, the grandmothers began to piece together the possibilities that in many cases, their grandchildren had been given away to government families, adopted illegally or abandoned at orphanages throughout the country.

With the knowledge and suspicion of the fate of many of their grandchildren, the Abuelas attempted to contact international human rights groups like the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, the United Nations and the Red Cross, in order to increase outside pressure on the Argentine government to return their grandchildren. However, they continually failed to get substantive support or locate any of their grandchildren. Attempts to work through the Argentine legal system through claims to the Supreme Court were even more discouraging. Delia Pons, a judge at the Juvenile Court in the city of Lomas de Zamora told members of the Grandmothers the following:

> Estoy convencida de que sus hijos eran terroristas, y terrorista es sinónimo de asesino. A los asesinos yo no pienso devolverles los hijos porque no sería justo hacerlo. No tienen derecho a criarlos. Tampoco me voy a pronunciar por la devolución de los niños a ustedes. Es ilógico perturbar a esas criaturas que están en manos de familias decentes que sabrán educarlos como no supieron hacerlo ustedes con sus hijos. Sólo bajo mi cadáver van a obtener la tenencia de esos niños.[49]

[48] "Interview with a member of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (1).
[49] Las Abuelas, *La Historia,* 26.

Responses from other members of the judicial system were equally disheartening. It would not be until December of 1978 that the Abuelas achieved their first real sign of progress: The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), part of the Organization of American States, responded to their letters and announced it would begin an investigation.[50]

This moment would begin a series of positive outcomes for the organization. An increasing number of human rights organizations, like the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Countries of the Southern Cone (CLAMOR), expressed the desire to help the mission of the Abuelas. And shortly after, they proved to be successful. In August of 1979, the Grandmothers were able to locate Anatole Boris and Victoria Eva Julien Grisonas, two siblings who had been adopted by a Chilean couple after they were found abandoned in Valparaíso, Chile.[51] The restitution of these grandchildren not only raised the hopes of all of the members of the Grandmothers, but it also served to thrust them further into the spotlight and awareness of international organizations like Amnesty International.

Throughout this period, membership in the Abuelas continued to grow. While many of the organization's goals were different from those of the Madres, the two organizations continued to work together, meeting in the plaza every Thursday to demand answers from military officials. Both groups employed similar strategies and processes in their search for the truth although the Grandmothers were able to produce more tangible outcomes through the restitution of a growing number of grandchildren. Despite these successes, major changes began to emerge in Argentina, affecting not only the characteristics of the organizations, but also the political realities of the Argentine state.

2.7 The Decline of the Dictatorship and the Return to Democracy

By 1981, the military junta in Argentina was on the decline. Disappearances and illegal

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[50] Ibid., 32.
[51] Ibid., 34.

detentions were rapidly decreasing, increasing pressure from foreign actors limited the government's actions, and economic instability left the public uneasy. On March 29, 1981, Roberto Eduardo Viola replaced Videla as President and immediately attempted to implement a series of reforms that aimed to reduce inflation and the government deficit, and open political power back to certain civilian sectors. To some, these policies indicated that the hardline government was weakening. As Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, Argentine political scientists, write:

> El espíritu conciliador del *violismo* suponía un cierto reconocimiento de que el régimen podía haber sido demasiado duro en algunas ocasiones, y que había llegado la hora, que María Elena Walsh reclamó en 1979 y que ahora Viola estaba dispuesto a protagonizar, de confiar en la madurez y responsabilidad de los argentinos y de abrazar los valores de libertad y justicia que todos compartían.[52]

Unfortunately, the conciliatory spirit of Viola's policy angered other military officials who felt the policies strayed too far from the original goals of El Proceso. As the economic and political situation continued to decline, other military officials stepped in and on December 11, 1981, Viola was deposed as president and replaced by Leopoldo Galtieri.

Amid all the unrest, the Madres, and members of the Abuelas with them, returned to the Plaza de Mayo for their first Resistance March, a 24-hour march to demand human rights and to protest the changes in the government. The march began at 3:30 on December 10, 1981 and the turnout was low. While hundreds of members attended previous marches in the plaza, the First Resistance March was attended by less than one hundred Madres. Those that did attend marched through the rain as they were surrounded by police men and military dogs, ready to arrest them. María del Rosario Cerruti commented on the events of that night, saying, "Allí, soportamos todos los insultos, pero empezó a amanecer y se empezaron a ir, se empezaron a ir, se empezaron a ir. Ese día hubo cambios en la Casa de Gobierno".[53] And the changes were significant. As president, Galtieri endeavored to improve the Argentine economy and improve the position of the

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[52] Novaro and Palermo, *La Dictadura Militar,* 368.
[53] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 129.

military again. But, as the economy continued to decline, Galtieri came up with an extravagant solution: to go to war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands.

The Falkland Islands were a small set of islands off the coast of Argentina under British control. While Argentines had historically claimed these islands as the Malvinas and believed it to be a legitimate territory that had been unfairly taken from them by British imperialism, Argentina had little influence on the islands. Despite this, Galtieri believed a war against Britain would solve three problems: firstly, it would showcase the power of the Argentine Armed Forces; secondly, it would spur Argentine nationalism and patriotism; and, thirdly, the war would detract attention from other issues, like skyrocketing inflation and high unemployment.[54] With this plan in mind, in April of 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands.

Initially, Argentine forces met little resistance. The population of the islands was small and although they mostly identified as British, these small agricultural and ranching communities could do little to interfere with the Argentine military. However, Britain soon responded by sending their navy to the islands, acting quickly to regain their advantage by sinking the *Belgrano* with torpedoes and killing the 323 soldiers on board.[55] Over the next few months, the conditions in the Falkland Islands continued to deteriorate and the situation did not look good for Argentina. The Argentine populace came to view the conflict increasingly negatively and unrest began to envelop the country.

The Madres took advantage of the conflict in the Malvinas in many ways. As the Falklands War progressed, the military dictatorship came under increasing scrutiny by international actors, organizations and the press. At one of the marches in the Plaza de Mayo, a member of both the Madres and the Abuelas named Delia Giovanola was photographed holding a sign that read, "Las Malvinas son argentinas, los desaparecidos también" – the Malvinas are Argentine, the

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[54] Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America,* 131.
[55] Ibid., 132.

disappeared are too – and the photo was quickly picked up by newspapers around the world, increasing awareness of the disappeared and also prompting discussions on the nationalization of human rights in Argentina.[56] Despite the celebrity of the photo, the issue of the disappeared would continue to be overlooked by the ongoing struggle between Great Britain and Argentina.

On June 14, 1982, the Falklands War ended. Argentine forces had been ill prepared for war and found themselves with no alternative but to surrender after only 72 days at war. Despite the short duration of the conflict, the costs were relatively high: 255 British soldiers and 649 Argentine soldiers had been killed.[57] And just four days after the war ended, Galtieri resigned as president. The loss was an embarrassment for the military and the government was viewed by much of the public as illegitimate, prompting military officials to resign and calling for democracy. After Galtieri's resignation, General Reynaldo Bignone would serve as president for approximately one year in order to aid in the transition process and lead the country until a new president could be elected. And, after seven years under military rule, Raúl Alfonsin was elected President of Argentina and inaugurated on December 10, 1983, officially returning the country to democracy.

2.8 The Second Division: Tensions within the Madres

With the return to democracy, the government immediately looked to examine the injustices of the military regime. Just five days after being inaugurated, President Alfonsín created the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) to investigate accusations of torture, kidnappings and extralegal killings associated with the disappeared that had been systematically organized by the military. Over its nine-month tenure, the ten-person committee of the CONADEP collected around 7,000 statements and interviews and cases before writing their final report, *Nunca Más* (Never Again).[58] However, CONADEP, its findings and its mission

[56] Novaro and Palermo, *La Dictadura Militar,* 441.
[57] Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America,* 134.
[58] Agata Fijalkowski, "Truth and Reconciliation Commissions," in *An Introduction to Transitional Justice,* ed. Olivera Simić (New York City: Routledge, 2017), 92.

were not without controversy.

As they began to meet with members of the commission to discuss their experience and share their records, tensions began to emerge among the Madres. Some of the women believed that CONADEP was too limited in scope and should be expanded to encapsulate all accusations of violations of human rights that occurred during the military regime while other members believed that while not perfect, CONADEP was a step in the right direction for the new democracy.[59] With the publication of *Nunca Más*, new reforms to the military and the first trials of military officials responsible for human rights violations, the Madres found themselves increasingly at odds with one another. Attempts to agree upon new goals for the organization failed. Controversy and disagreements continued until January 1986, when the organization was to vote on who would represent the group as president. On one side was Hebe de Bonafini, a strong critic of the Alfonsín government and what it saw as incomplete and weak reforms. This group was radical in their demands and took a hard, inflexible stance. The other side was led by María Adela de Antokoletz and this side was more willing to compromise with the government and what it would reveal about the disappeared. Vera Jarach, a member who sided with de Antokoletz described the issue as such:

> Así que justiciar no, por ese lado. Homenaje no, por ese lado. Identificación de los huesos e identidad, no. Esas tres cosas. Nosotros es al revés, identificación de los huesos sí, porque vos debés saber y tener los restos y poder haber un luto y tener una tumba. La verdad la necesitamos, y la justicia también. Homenajes a nuestros hijos desde ya, es lo que más queremos.[60]

Ultimately, Hebe de Bonafini won the election and the members of the organization who backed de Antokoletz would leave the Association of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in order to form the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Founding Line).

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[59] Maria Codoni et al. "Postdictadura Argentina: políticas de derechos humanos y el cisma de Madres de Plaza de Mayo" (Master's thesis, Georgetown University, 2016), 41.
[60] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 157.

This schism between the Association of Mothers and the Founding Line of Mothers is vital to the understanding of the organizations as in many ways, the organizations are still treated as a monolith (and to a certain extent, with the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo as well). Despite this, the two groups have opposite views on important issues regarding the disappeared and the government's response to the military's violations. Most notably, the organizations have opposing views on exhumations, tributes and memorials, and economic reparations for the deaths of the disappeared. [61] These differences in perspectives and beliefs have had important implications in determining how Argentines, and international actors in general, perceive the organizations. Furthermore, differences between the two groups have affected the actions and strategies they employ, resulting in significant disparities in their current operations.

2.9 The Current State of the Organizations

Since the division between the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Founding Line, both organizations, as well as the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo have remained active. The women continue to march every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo although their numbers continue to dwindle. However, the activism of the groups varies in intensity and field.

[61] Codoni et al, "Postdictadura Argentina," 62.

Figure 1 A lone member of the Founding Line, Nora Cortiñas, marches in the Plaza de Mayo in September 2016

The Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo remains most active in the Plaza de Mayo itself. At the Thursday marches around the pyramid, the largest portion of mothers there are part of the Association of Mothers rather than from the Founding Line or the Abuelas. Hebe de Bonafini is still the president and an outspoken political critic. In fact, in August of 2016, de Bonafini was arrested in a move some accused of being politically motivated after she refused to give evidence as ordered by a judge.[62] The controversy resulted in hundreds gathering in the Plaza de Mayo to support de Bonafini and the Association of Mothers.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Founding Line also remain active in both the marches in the plaza as well as through participation in other social movements. The Founding Line members support memorialization projects like the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires and well as the Espacio de la Memoria. In the latter project, the Founding Line occupies a building on the site of the former clandestine detention center, the ESMA, where the organization offers

[62] Mayra Pertossi, "Mothers of Plaza de Mayo head ordered arrested in Argentina," *The Associated Press,* August 4, 2016, https://apnews.com/e9c008b9db1f447da4a5d3e54fde4b15.

community events, a music school and other activities designed to commemorate the disappeared and promote their memorialization in society. In the words of María del Rosario Cerruti, "Porque nadie nos dijo dónde están nuestros hijos, siempre seguimos reclamando al Estado que tiene que hacerse responsable de lo que hicieron aquellos que lo usurparon. Siempre esa palabrita, a no olvidarla".[63] For the Founding Line, the most important thing will always be the search for their still missing children and the objective of ensuring that the Argentine citizenry never forget the atrocities of the dictatorship.

The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo have the fewest remaining members. From their inception, they were the smallest group but there are currently only a dozen or so members still living, and even fewer are active in the organization. Despite this, the organization is still achieving great successes. The organization arranges for a variety of theater performances, art exhibitions and other social activities aimed to raise awareness of the grandchildren who are still missing. The Abuelas have an office where they invite anyone who has doubts about their identity and suspects they may be a child of the disappeared to come forward for a DNA test in order to confirm their identity. Through this spontaneous presentation system, as well as continuous investigations tracing the whereabouts of suspected disappeared grandchildren, the Abuelas have identified 128 grandchildren as of September of 2018.[64] Additionally, the Grandmothers have been nominated for a multitude of awards, most recently for the Nobel Peace Prize in May of 2018.[65]

Unfortunately, despite their many successes, the future of these organizations is not great. The women that make up the organizations are aging rapidly, and all of the organizations are already dealing with dwindling membership and decreasing activities. Their experiences are invaluable and extremely important, both in the context of Argentine history as well as studies of

[63] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 190.
[64] Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, "Otro nieto recupera se identidad y su historia," *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo,* August 3, 2018, https://www.abuelas.org.ar/noticia/otro-nieto-recupera-su-identidad-y-su-historia-1018.
[65] "Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo otra vez candidatas al Nobel de la Paz."

human rights globally.

2.10 Conclusions

This chapter provided a broad overview of the history of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The large number of disappearances that began prior to the military coup in 1976 precipitated the creation of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and by 1977, the women were already establishing themselves as a potential challenge to the military through their protests in the Plaza de Mayo and their increasing recognition due to their adoption of the white handkerchiefs. Attempts at repression and the forced disappearance of some of the mothers themselves served only to take a harder stance against the government and commit themselves more completely to their search for the disappeared. With the return to democracy, and the internal divisions that emerged among the group, the Mothers and Grandmothers found themselves able to more freely express their opinions, due in part to the freedoms enabled by the new democratic government and also due to the women's ability to align with the branch of the Mothers that best represent their views.

This chapter provides the context about El Proceso, the disappeared and the development of the Mothers and Grandmothers. While the history of the Madres and Abuelas is well established, the significance of the various stages of the organizations' development and its relation to the women's increasing celebrity worldwide. As will be discussed in the following chapters, each of these points in the organizations' histories serves an important purpose in their emergence as the iconic organization of the disappeared in Latin America.

CHAPTER 3

Gender and Feminism

In evaluating the factors that allowed the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo to gain international celebrity and influence, the impact that gender and feminism had on the groups cannot be ignored. The growth of these organizations coincided with the international feminist movement and the push for female participation and empowerment while simultaneously being challenged by the political realities in the region. In this chapter, I explore how the Madres and Abuelas, in contrast with similar regional organizations, were able to take advantage of their gender and the feminist movement in order to benefit their mission. I begin my analysis on the macro-level, looking at how the international feminist movement itself played out in Argentina in comparison to other countries before slowly narrowing in focus, examining how gender roles, male exclusion, the image of the grieving mother and finally symbology impacted the efforts of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

3.1 The International Growth of Feminist Movements

While feminist ideology in the Americas can be traced back centuries to women like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), popular feminism emerges in the region with the rise of the suffrage movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the goals of the modern feminist movement were relatively universal throughout North and South America. In 1915, these common goals of women's suffrage, gender equality and social welfare were affirmed by one of the keynote speakers at the Second Pan American Scientific Congress: "We the women of North and South America, which possess similar conceptions of individual rights and constitutional government,

possess a common duty to mankind which we cannot ignore".[66] Women in Latin America and the United States used their shared interests to successfully push for the creation of groups like Inter-American Commission on Women as part of the Organization of American States and the Pan American Association for the Advancement of Women.

Despite this initial period of cooperation between women throughout the Americas, the outbreak of World War II vastly altered how feminism was theorized and pursued by women in the U.S. and Latin America. The pressures of the war and the lack of male workers due to their deployment overseas gave women in the United States facilitated increased autonomy as they worked in factories and helped the war movement. With their newfound autonomy, women in the U.S. were unwilling to return to the status quo that had existed before the war, allowing them to take a hardline stance about the rights and progress they wanted to see with respect to gender equality. In Latin America, involvement in World War II was less significant, and consequently, women were unable to benefit as they did in the U.S. As a result, feminist ideas rapidly gained popularity in the U.S. while the women's movement in Latin America was left at a disadvantage, forced to remarket their mission as a class struggle, this is when you see a breakaway of the United States from Latin America in which feminist ideas rapidly gain ground in the United States, while the women's movement in Latin America became less explicit and more concerned with issues of class, education and social welfare.[67] In many ways, the inability for women in Latin America to promote an explicitly feminist agenda resulted in the stagnation of the women's movement in the region.

For many scholars, the stagnation of the women's movement in Latin America is rooted not only in the divergence of female autonomy in the United States and Latin America due to

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[66] Francesca Miller, "Latin American Feminism and the Transnational Arena," in *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America: Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America*, ed. Emilie L. Bergmann (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 14.
[67] Ibid., 22.

World War II, but also in the establishment of a universal contemporary feminist theory that disregarded and isolated women who were not white Europeans from developed countries. Instead, women from developing countries, especially women of color and of mixed racial backgrounds, the illiterate and the impoverished, live in oppressive societies that offer them few opportunities to make claims towards collective rights or political status.[68] The idea of the "Third World woman" offered "proof of the universality of the patriarchy and the traditional subjugation of women".[69] As such, women throughout Latin America had little support in their endeavors — challenged by traditional gender roles that sought to limit their rights and abandoned by the women who had been successful in their quest but who regarded Latin American women as inferior, not for their gender, but for their race and country. This resulted in a perspective where Latin American women were seen as incapable of promoting change and achieving equality within the oppressive, "machista" society in which they lived.

Instead, the development of the women's movement in Latin America came to be described as one of "multiple feminisms".[70] This concept attempts to identify how women's movements in Latin America often experienced different outcomes and different goals depending on their own regional context. Given the different racial backgrounds, histories, socio-economic status, culture, and political ideology among the various Latin American countries, women in Latin America recognized the need for subjectivity and fluidity in order to better address "the history of feminist differences on the continent".[71] The belief was that the best way for Latin American women to achieve progress and equality was by recognizing the differences that exist between them and create individualized solutions to address them.

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[68] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* ed. Chandra Tapalde Mohanty, Ann Rousso and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 5-6.
[69] María Luisa Femenias and Amy Oliver, *Feminist Philosophy in Latin America and Spain* (Amsterdam: Rodophi, 2007), 129.
[70] Ibid., 73.
[71] Ibid., 74.

In this atmosphere of multiple feminisms, the ability for women to demand change varied greatly across Latin America. More than thirty years would pass from the time when Ecuador became the first country to grant women's suffrage in 1929 and when Paraguay passed similar legislation in 1961. In Argentina, women's suffrage was granted in 1947, making it the 11th country in Latin America to do so. Looking at the chronology of the women's suffrage movement in Latin America, it would not appear that Argentina was overly conservative or liberal. However, Argentine women had a powerful ally in their new president, Juan Perón, and his wife. While Perón was a rather controversial figure in Argentina for his socialist policies, he made his dedication to the suffrage movement clear in a speech to Congress following his inauguration in June 1946, stating "The incorporation of women in our civil and political activities with all the rights that are now only given to men will be an indisputable contribution to the perfection of our civic customs".[72] With women's suffrage as one of his priorities, Perón would look to his wife to unite the various factions of feminists throughout the country,

At the same time that Juan Perón was lobbying politicians to change laws regarding women's rights, Eva Perón, affectionately known as Evita, was leading the popular feminist movement in an effort create a unified group and set of demands. Through the creation of the Eva Perón Foundation and countless groups and organizations like the Evita Women's Center, Evita's work across all classes and groups in Argentina closed the gap between conservative and liberal/socialistic feminist groups, encouraging them to work together for women's rights such as the right to vote and the right to equal pay for equal work. When it appeared that Congress' vote on the suffrage bill was in danger, Evita would rally women and rights activists and march to the Plaza de Mayo to demand an affirmative vote. And the tactic worked. On September 23, 1947, women were officially granted the right to vote, and with it, came a new wave of women's

[72] Gregory Hammond, *Women's Suffrage Movement and Feminism in Argentina from Roca to Peron (*Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 151.

empowerment.

Following the 1947 vote, women's participation in politics exploded. Evita created the Peronist Women's Party and in presidential election of 1951, the first major national election in which women could vote, women's participation was incredible. Women turned out at higher rates than men – 90.32 percent of eligible women voted compared to 86.08 percent of eligible men.[73] And while the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo would not appear until nearly 30 years later, the women's suffrage movement and Juan and Eva Perón's influence on it, would have a monumental impact on the organizations. As Hammond writes, "The Peronist version of feminism therefore exalted and upheld the maternal role, expanding its influence and activity into the political sphere as a means of mass mobilization".[74] This version of feminism unique to Argentina would allow the Madres and the Abuelas to occupy a space unheard of compared to other countries. Further, Evita's actions and her mobilization of women to places like the Plaza de Mayo would serve as models when the organizations began their own journey.

While 30 years passed between women's suffrage movement and the formation of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the impact of this emergent form of Argentine feminism that lauded maternalism and mass mobilization is clear. Many of the women in the organization would have been young adults at the time of the women's suffrage movement and their protest in the Plaza de Mayo. Azucena Villaflor, one of the founders of the Madres and the organization's first president, was 23 years old at the time of the Women's March and while she never explicitly stated that the feminist movement had an impact on the Madres, some of her statements indicate that the possibility exists. Villaflor told fellow mothers, "nosotros lo que tenemos que hacer es ir a la Plaza de Mayo, como hicieron nuestros mayores" and this reference to "our elders" can be

[73] Ibid., 171.
[74] Ibid., 173-174.

interpreted as a reference to the women who protested in the Plaza de Mayo in 1947.[75] Regardless of whether Villaflor's statement refers to women's movement or other events in the Plaza de Mayo, like the Peronist movement's Loyalty Days, what is clear is that the Madres de Plaza de Mayo were provided with a unique environment to carry out their mission.

On the international level, organizations like the United Nations became increasingly interested in women and their power to enact change. The United Nations' declaration of the International Year of the Woman in 1975 and the International Decade of the Woman from 1976-1985, a period that almost directly mirrors the duration of El Proceso, was a direct nod to the growing influence of women worldwide. On the regional level, ideas such as Third World Feminism and Femenias and Oliver's concept of multiple feminisms meant that women in Latin America lacked a cohesive and defined system to organize, make demands and introduce change. But on the national level, Evita and the women's suffrage movement of 1947 had created a unique form of feminism that idolized women as maternal figures and pointed to mass mobilization as the quintessential medium of change. In this way, Argentina's unique form of feminism provided the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo with a preliminary sort of framework within which to direct their efforts. Argentine feminism's idealization of women as maternal figures meant that gender roles, male exclusion, and the image of the grieving mother would emerge as powerful tools to be used by the organizations, in both conscious and unconscious ways.

3.2 Gender Roles

One of the most powerful aspects of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo is their ability to simultaneously embrace and subvert gender roles. In their journey for the truth, these women needed to carefully toe the line between preserving their image as apolitical actors

[75] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 52.

concerned only with their families, and political actors that needed to confront a repressive government in order to find answers. Fortunately, the feminist framework that existed in Argentina prior to the formation of the Madres had already exposed the country to the emergence of maternal figures in the political sphere. However, these women would take this form of feminism and push it as far as conceivably possible given the circumstances. At first, the women embraced their status as mothers because that was the most important aspect of their mission. However, as the organization became increasingly political, the women twisted this maternalistic Argentine feminism to suit their growing political interests.

Before its official founding in 1977, the mothers who would become members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo lacked experience in political matters. Despite the growing calls for feminism and women's rights, a culture of machismo still meant that the vast majority of women abided by traditional gender roles as homemakers and mothers. So, when the first mothers began to meet in the plaza, members like Carmen Cobo knew they were already at a disadvantage:

> Era una organización muy precaria, muy incipiente y sin experiencia, nadie había sido militante de las mamas. Se había hecho la militancia doméstica en la casa, la militancia de cuidar el hogar, cocinar, coser, mantener la ropa limpia, lo básico. Pero ya lanzarse así con un oponente tan feroz armado hasta los dientes era una desigualdad total.[76]

And Cobo is right. The power inequality between the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the military was vast – the women's "domestic militancy" would be no match for the government's political power and weaponry.

Despite their limited autonomy and experience in the political realm, the Mothers refused to give up. And as the organization began to grow larger, the women were united not by political ideology, class or religion, but rather by motherhood. María del Rosario Cerruti commented on the importance of the women's shared responsibility as mothers searching for their missing

[76] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 85.

children, stating

> Nadie se preguntaba de qué partida era, qué hacía su hijo, dónde estaba, con quién militaba. No nos importaba nada. Había madres científicas, había madres analfabetas, había madres judías, madres mahometanas, madres cristianas, madres de lo que sea, todas buscábamos a los hijos y queríamos que nos dijeran dónde estaban y qué habían hecho.[77]

By sharing this identity, the women in the organization were able to overlook potentially contentious issues – political views, education, and religion – and focus on the mission at hand: finding the disappeared. Hebe de Bonafini, the current president of the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, confirmed the organization's priorities in an interview in 1981 where she stated, "We are very much aware that what we do is essentially political, but we are totally nonpartisan. When a mother comes to our headquarters and says 'My son has disappeared' that is the only thing we care about".[78] By focusing on their search for their children and their shared struggles as mothers above all other issues, the organization transformed into a network of women that shared an unbreakable bond. United in their grief and determination, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo cemented the fact that they subscribed first to gender roles and the importance of motherhood, and second to political activities.

It is important to note that these bonds of motherhood and disappearances united the mothers to an extent that to many, the disappeared children were transformed from individuals to a collective in which every mother had a claim to every disappeared person. For mothers like Carmen Robles de Zurita, the view of the disappeared as being collectively 'owned' was due not only to the shared experience of their disappearances, but also because the other disappeared children offer hope for the mother's actual child:

> To me your daughter is my daughter, she's a little bit mine. My children are a little bit yours, because I hope yours will appear so that she can tell me, so I can find some

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[77] Ibid., 63.
[78] César A. Chelala, "Women of Valor: An Interview with Mothers of Plaza de Mayo," in *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children & Human Rights in Latin America,* ed. Marjorie Agosin and Monica Bruno (Fredonia, New York: White Pine Press, 1993), 66.

> consolation, know, know what happened to some of them… because the children belong to everyone, to every person in those circles we walk in.[79]

Similarly, Carmen Aguiar de Lapaco noted that the mothers were inseparable from one another and their mission was destined to last until the last mother died due to their shared goals of justice:

> Maybe the person who killed my daughter won't be judged in my daughter's case, but it's possible that he'll be judged in others'. And this, I believe, was worth our fight. And I believe that, in spite of the fact that they want to put an end to all this, for us, there won't be an end.[80]

Maybe their children will never be found alive, maybe some of the disappeared will never be found at all. Either way, this collective view of motherhood transformed the way in which the organization functioned, further unifying the women in their journey and increasing incentives for the mothers to promote any sort of change, even if it might not have been socially acceptable at the time for them to do so.

While motherhood and the fate of their children may have been the priority of the organization, the creation of the organization itself constituted a violation of existing gender roles at the time. Argentine women were expected to be caring mothers, but they were also expected to stay at home, a principle the Madres would violate just by going to the plaza. Matilde Mellibovsky, a member of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, described the organization's subversion of gender roles in the following ways:

> We were supposed to keep our mouths shut: we made accusations.
> We were supposed to be submissive: we unmasked them.
> We were supposed to be quiet: we screamed with all our might.
> They needed to bury things quietly: we dug them up.
> Above all, we were supposed to stay very quietly at home: but we went out, walked around, got into unimagined places.[81]

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[79] Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* trans. Maria and Matthew Proser (Williamantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1997), 68.
[80] Ibid., 151.
[81] Ibid., 52.

By disregarding political acts and instead organizing only for the purpose of finding their children, these women were able to take their status as mothers and use it to simultaneously protect themselves from repression and justify the multiple ways in which their actions subverted traditional gender roles.

Importantly, the Madres did not only subvert gender roles in the public sphere through their marches in the plaza. Equally significant is how their search for the disappeared transformed their private life as well. The traditional roles assigned to men and women had been completely reversed – the women were the ones to leave the house and to engage in politics while the men were left at home. As Hebe de Bonafini described:

> The role of the fathers is silent, but as with all silent and quiet things, they are sometimes the most significant. To return home and find some hot food, a smiling face waiting for use without recriminations – sometimes a smiling but anguished face, worrying about our delays but thinking that what we do is important – that is what makes it worthwhile.[82]

With the men at home, caring for the house and the children, the Madres were completely freed from traditional responsibilities that may have affected their political autonomy, allowing them to dedicate themselves more fully to the search for the disappeared. The Madres were in the midst of a cultural revolution whereby their roles as political activists were only growing stronger as the marches in the plaza continued.

As the dictatorship continued, the Madres escalated their activities. As the number of disappeared continued to rise, the Madres found their activities straying farther from the small quiet protests they began with, evolving from a small group of mothers meeting in the Plaza de Mayo to an international campaign for justice. The women first began to travel to neighboring countries – Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay – to seek out answers and talk with representatives of other human rights organizations. But as the Mothers gained recognition, they were received by some of the world's most important figures:

[82] Chelala, "Women of Valor", 61.

> Cuando llegamos a Estados Unidos fuimos a la OEA [Organización de los Estados Americanos], a las Naciones Unidas, a la Casa Blanca, a hacer todas las denuncias posibles. Y cuando terminamos de hacer las denuncias la gente de Estados Unidos dice: 'Ahora hay que ir a ver al Papa.' 'Pero con qué?', les dijimos. 'Les sacamos los pasajes nosotros', contestaron. Nos sacaron los pasajes y nos fuimos las tres a Roma.[83]

María del Rosario Cerruti's recollection of the organization's travels to meet with members of the UN, the Organization of American States, the White House and even the Pope, demonstrates the degree to which outside actors were willing to help the Madres. But more importantly it exemplifies how the transformation these women endured – from traditional housewives to members of a political organization that merited the attention from important actors from around the world.

Between the organization's inception in 1977 to the country's return to democracy in 1983, the agency of the women involved in the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo had expanded greatly. The organization simultaneous embraced how traditional gender roles idealized the concept of motherhood while turning the practical applications of these gender roles on its head, leaving their spouses to manage their roles as homemakers and caretakers while they took on increasingly political roles. By capitalizing on the glorification of motherhood and Argentina's unique form of maternal feminism, the Madres created a space for themselves in the public sphere that allowed them to introduce themselves to politics in a safe manner. However, as they gained recognition among both nationally and internationally, the organization was able to increasingly take advantage of the protections provided to them by their status as mothers in order to advance their political agency.

3.3 Male Exclusion

As the names of the organizations suggest, the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo are exclusively organized and led by women. The one exception to this rule

[83] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 113.

seems to be Abel Madariaga. This man had been kidnapped together with his pregnant wife and while Madariaga had later been released and exiled, he would never see his wife again. In his search to find his disappeared wife and unborn child, Madariaga approached the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo when democracy returned in 1983 and became the first male member of the organization, as well as the group's secretary, a position he continues to hold today.[84] While Madariaga may be a clear example of an exception, the decision to exclude men from the search for the families' missing children and grandchildren was quite deliberate.

When the women first began to meet in the Plaza de Mayo, men were not prohibited from joining in the search. Many could not come because they had to work but there were a few cases in which men joined the mothers in the Plaza de Mayo and tried to aid in the search. Aída Sarti recalled what happened when the parents first began to gain notice in the plaza:

> Cuando ellos se empezaron a dar cuenta, comenzó a estar la policía de civil, que estaba siempre me acuerdo el comisario con un traje caqui, y empezaron a decir: 'Las locas de la plaza'. Y estuvieron los cinco padres, dos de ellos después se suicidaron.[85]

The suicides of two of the five fathers was unfortunate but it did not directly lead to the prohibition of men within the organization. What cemented the organization's adoption of male exclusion was the danger that the men represented – to the organization itself, and its mission.

The exclusion of the fathers, at the very least in the actual activities of the organization, was strongly tied to fears about repression. As Elia Espen said, "No queríamos que estuvieran [los padres] por temor. Al ser hombres tenían más posibilidades de que los llevaron que a nosotras".[86] If the women worked alone, they faced a lower risk of repression. If the fathers of the disappeared were to participate, it further increased the risk that the government would take action against the organization. According to *Nunca Más,* the government's report about the

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[84] Laura Vales, "'Para mí es un regalo, la familia que buscaba,'" *Página 12,* February 24, 2010, https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-140916-2010-02-24.html.
[85] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 62.
[86] Ibid., 106.

disappearances, found that seven men were disappeared for every three women.[87] With men clearly being targeted at higher rates than women, the mothers decided that the father's involvement in an organization that would be actively going against the government would be dangerous not only for the men but also the women and the organization's entire mission. Obviously, the Madres and the Abuelas would not escape without repression – the disappearances of Azucena Villaflor and the other mothers was a clear demonstration of the government's distaste for the organization. But if men had participated, the consequences likely would have been much worse. As Iain Guest writes, "any sort of protest could sign his own death warrant".[88]

While men were primarily excluded due to the danger they presented to themselves and the organization, there was another important factor that limited their involvement: trust. The infiltration of the Madres by Alfredo Astiz and the resulting disappearance of Azucena Villaflor had taught the mothers that in many cases, men could not be trusted – and military men could not be trusted at all. But this had an interesting consequence. In Argentina, military service was required by law from 1901 to 1995 with a lottery system randomly selected which men would serve.[89] In this situation, there were many Argentine men who had participated in the military in the past and as such, were not welcome in the organization, even if they too were desperately searching for their child. Ilda Irrustita de Micucci and her husband Pepe had two of their children disappeared and while Ilda was welcomed into the Madres, Pepe's history with the armed forces was problematic. According to Ilda:

> We were surrounded by people who, when talking about the armed forces used a tone full of hatred, hatred that I also came to feel and which I tried to hide from my husband. I could not pretend very well and that affected him…[90]

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[87] *Nunca Más,* 294.
[88] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 54.
[89] Sebastian Galiani, Martin A. Rossi and Ernesto Schargrodsky, "Conscription and Crime: Evidence from the Argentine Draft Lottery," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 3,* no. *2 (*April 2011): 119-136.
[90] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 185.

This hatred and lack of trust in the military affected all the women, pushing them away from men they knew had participated in the military – even if it had been required of them by law – and instead continue their mission alone.

However, this did not mean that men were completely absent from the entire process. While the fathers were excluded from meetings, strategy planning and from participating in the actual marches in the Plaza de Mayo, many men still tried to help in their own way. Although they did not march alongside the mothers, some men would accompany the mothers to the plaza and observe the marches. And it was not only the fathers of the disappeared that came to the Plaza. In many cases, the whole family began as one member of the Grandmothers described how their support system changed as the organization grew larger:

> Empezamos las rondas solitas. Por un tiempo largo. Cuando fuimos creciendo… nuestros hijos… los hermanos, los tíos, los primos… entonces ellos se fueron a conversar con nosotras y nos fueron acompañar en la plaza para que no nos hicieron daño la policía.[91]

By just accompanying the Madres to the plaza, these men, whether they be the fathers, siblings, or relatives of the disappeared, they provided support for the organization that strengthened their movement and facilitated their actions in front of the church.

There is at least one case of a husband of one the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo going head to head with the government and avoiding backlash against himself and the Mothers. In this case, his wife, Marta Vásquez, had been detained during one of the marches in the Plaza de Mayo along with two other Madres. Vásquez described how her husband Perucho, a diplomat, took advantage of his government connections in his mission to help his wife: "He became desperate, stirred up the whole Secretariat [of Home Affairs], got to Ruiz Palacios' office and in two or three hours they gave the order to free us".[92] Despite this successful rescue mission, Marta

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[91] "Interview with a member of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (2), Interview by Catherine Paige Southworth, June 4, 2018.
[92] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 99.

Vásquez's situation was extremely unique. The vast majority of the time, men found themselves limited to helping the mothers only in an unofficial capacity – through moral support, and occasionally their physical presence in the plaza.

This combination of male exclusion and simultaneous support is fairly unique among other regional organizations concerned with the disappeared. In Mexico, an organization known as Eureka that consists of mothers of the disappeared and the Committee for the Defense of Prisoners, the Persecuted and the Disappeared are both exclusively female organized and yet they almost entirely lack any form of male support. Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, the president of the two organizations, attributed this lack of male support to the fact that "many fathers forbade their wives from going out on the streets to look for their children. There were some who had to choose between looking for their children and staying at home with their husbands".[93] Unfortunately, this lack of support had two significant consequences. For one, it limited the support network available to these women during their difficult and dangerous mission. And for another, it limited the size of the movement itself as some women who were threatened by their husbands in this way chose not to join the organization, leaving no one to fight for their missing child.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, other organizations in the region, like the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (AFDD) in Chile, that welcome both men and women although women continue to participate at much higher proportions than men. According to one estimate, there are only two men among the one hundred fifty active members in the organization.[94] However, from my interactions with the organizations, I estimate that women outnumbered men at a ratio of five to one. But with their inclusion came other problems. Men were more

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[93] Peter Hammer Verlag, *Compañeras: Voices from the Latin American Women's Movement* trans. Gaby Küppers (London: Latin America Bureau, 1994), 118.
[94] Patricia M. Chuchryk, "Subversive Mothers: The Women's Opposition to the Military Regime in Chile," in *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children & Human Rights in Latin America* ed. Marjorie Agosin and Monica Bruno (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1993), 90.

likely to face repression, feel isolated within the organization, and have less time to dedicate to their organization's activities.[95] And this negatively affected the AFDD. In this situation, women were left to organize, strategize and plan all of the AFDD's activities but because the organization included men, the AFDD would not carry the same image internationally that the Madres and Abuelas did.

3.4 The Image of the Grieving Mother and the Handkerchief

Tied to the idea of how gender roles and male exclusion affected the autonomy and power available to the Mothers and Grandmothers, the image they presented to both the national and the international community was an important factor influencing the organization's success. Pictures of these women marching in the Plaza de Mayo with the handkerchiefs wrapped around their head were published in newspapers around the world – and the image was powerful. The *Buenos Aires Herald*, the city's English language newspaper took note of the power of the Madres in a 1978 article writing, "Although their presence [that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo] has been largely ignored by the local press… they are on the schedule of almost every visiting journalist and television teams. Their sad story has travelled around the world."[96] Hundreds of mothers protesting a seemingly all-powerful military junta in order to demand the return of their children, despite knowing that the vast majority of them were likely dead. These pictures of the Madres showcased not only the power of a grieving mother, it also demonstrated the important role of the handkerchief and how it came to represent the women's struggle.

As previously discussed, the importance of motherhood in Argentina was an important factor in allowing the organization to avoid repression in its most severe forms. However, the specific type of motherhood that the women represented was something that was deeply

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[95] Ibid., 94.
[96] Bertoia, Luciana, "The Buenos Aires Herald: The newspaper that told the horror and the glory", *Papelitos: 78 historias sobre un Mundial en dictadura,* http://papelitos.com.ar/nota/buenos-aires-herald?z_language=en.

unfamiliar in both Argentina and many other countries. When the Madres came into existence, there was no other organization with a similar background. Forced disappearances were a new tool of repression and the scale of the situation in Argentina was massive and because of this, the Madres had no model to tell them what to do or how to proceed. In some ways, there were not even words to describe what was happening or who they were anymore. The Mothers did not know what it meant for their children to be disappeared: "When we deal with one of the disappeared, an unknown, culturally uncharted relationship is established… When someone disappears by force, everything remains surrounded with a tangle of conjectures, indeterminacies, doubts".[97] These women did not know whether their children were alive or dead, where they may be, or what may have happened to them. But, the women refused to acknowledge the fact that in all likelihood, their children were dead.

In this way, the mothers did not know how to describe themselves. Words did not exist for the situation these women found themselves in. As Foss and Domenici wrote, "While we have the terms *widow, widower,* and *orphan* to describe particular relational losses, the 'fact that there is no name for the one who has lost a child is one of enormous consequences: the nameless live in a kind of limbo'".[98] In the absence of any concise ways to define their struggle, the image of the mothers in the plaza proved to be the most effective means to communicate their stories with the world. Their actions and dedication to their children was not seen as unusual but rather "a coherent expression of their socialization, of their acceptance of the dominant sexual division of labor and their own subordination within it".[99] With their actions being seen as a natural concern for mothers, the women were able to gather publicly and express their concerns for their

[97] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 27.
[98] Karen A. Foss and Kathy L. Domenici, "Haunting Argentina: Synecdoche in the Protests of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87, no. 3 (2001): 241.
[99] Marysa Navarro, "The Personal is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo," in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements,* ed. Susan Eckstein (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 256-257.

children.

One member of the Founding Line of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo has said that, in some ways, the Madres believed that their image and impact on the public would be much greater if they emphasized their maternal role, although they were unclear to what extent:

> Razonábamos que la cosa maternal podía infundir un poquito más del respecto, si es que existe eso, o existió. Hubo dos cosas: una es el respecto de la madre, a la figura de la madre, y la otra es el hecho de que una cosa cerrada, un círculo cerrado de varias personas que van del brazo y afrontan la situación, superan los miedos y dan vueltas, es un círculo muy importante.[100]

Vera Jarach's statement mirrors assessments made by scholars that characterize mothers of the disappeared as "protectors of life and truth, and sorrowful mothers who held their hearts in their hands and the haunting of their children's voices in their own".[101] But the image of Madres in the plaza became exponentially more important following the adoption of the handkerchief.

After the Mothers inadvertently chose the handkerchief as the symbol of their organization, the Madres became recognizable worldwide. The *pañales* and *pañuelos*, translated as either handkerchiefs, scarves or diapers, may have been originally chosen as a simple, readily-available way for the Mothers to identify themselves in their procession to Luján, but the symbolism of the white headwear had important political consequences. For one, the *pañales* reference the cloth diapers the women used while raising their children, and in this way the *pañales* "communicate the most maternal and basic emotional, physical and psychological bonds between mother and child".[102] By invoking motherhood, the members of the Madres once again worked to establish their status as mothers over their political actions. In doing so, the image presented by the Mothers became universal – applicable and recognizable by women across the world, regardless of their location, political views, socioeconomic status.

[100] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 107-108.
[101] Cynthia Bejarano, "Las Super Madres de Latino America: Transforming Motherhood by Challenging Violence in Mexico, Argentina, and El Salvador," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 1 (2002): 131.
[102] Foss and Domenici, "Haunting Argentina," 244.

But the *pañuelos* also disseminated a subtler message about the disappeared themselves. While government leaders had maintained that the vast majority of the disappeared were subversive terrorists, the Mothers' use of the handkerchiefs contrasted this rhetoric. The white color of the *pañales* signified innocence and in this way, it served to contradict government propaganda with the idea that the disappeared were not only innocent, but they were children. As Foss and Domenici explain "the disappeared were children – indeed, the next generation – who had been disappeared by a regime that wanted to exercise the most extreme forms of control over its citizens".[103] This implicit invocation of the mother-child relationship, proclamation of the innocence of the disappeared, and denunciation of the junta's actions solidified the image of the Madres as a noble organization of mothers dedicated to nothing but finding justice for their missing children.

By adopting the use of the handkerchiefs and prioritizing their status as mothers, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo set themselves apart from other human rights organizations in Latin America at the time. While many organizations carried photos of the disappeared or wrote messages on banners and posters, the Mothers were the first organization to present a truly united image that perfectly symbolized their mission. For example, when compared to the AFDD in Chile, a mixed-gender organization that wore photos of the disappeared on their lapels, it becomes clear why the Mothers became globally recognizable while the AFDD has struggled to gain widespread recognition to the same extent as the Madres. Because the AFDD was composed of both genders, the members of the organization blended together with the general public. Further, the use of the photo on the lapel limited the visibility of the organization's mission – the lapels could only be seen from the front and one needed to be close to its members in order to make out the details of the photo. In contrast, the lack of male members and the use of the

[103] Ibid., 245.

handkerchief allowed the Mothers to stand out from a distance. In the years that followed the appearance of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, organizations across the world now wear white handkerchiefs on their heads, a clear nod to the success of the Madres in creating a reputation for themselves and their mission.

3.5 Conclusion

The role that gender and feminism played in shaping the activities of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo is undeniable. From its inception, the organization has intended to provide women and mothers with resources and support during the search for their disappeared children. Argentina's unique feminist history created an atmosphere that promoted political activism among maternal figures like the Madres. Further, the organizations' active decisions to exclude male participation, wear white handkerchiefs in order to increase visibility, and simultaneously embrace and subvert the gender roles present in Argentina at the time.

Other organizations of the disappeared in Latin America share some of these characteristics and tendencies with the Madres. For example, the Comadres of El Salvador and AFADDES in Colombia both boast higher levels of female participation compared to males. But the Madres set themselves apart as unique not only due to the uniformity of the organizations' actions and characteristics but also due to environmental factors out of the women's' control. The Mothers and Grandmothers took advantage of preexisting conditions within the country in order to distinguish themselves. However, while gender and feminism contributed to the initial ability of the Mothers to emerge on the national and international stage, the organizations' political actions, as well as the role of international actors, would become increasingly important as the organization developed.

CHAPTER 4

Political Factors

The Mothers and Grandmothers did not begin as a political organization but rather a desperate group of mothers searching for their disappeared loved ones. Their mission was inherently political in its actions, and yet the organizations lacked structure as well as political knowledge and experience. While the true severity of this period of state terrorism would not emerge until years after democracy had been reestablished, some women were entirely unaware of the implications of the disappearances. María Adela de Antokoletz, one of the fourteen original founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, has commented that after her two children were disappeared, she did not suspect then-President Videla to be responsible for the disappearances.[104] Hebe de Bonafini, the president of the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, had not been able to continue her education past elementary school, limiting her formal understanding of Argentine politics and the law.[105] At first, this lack of political awareness made the organizations' mission difficult to achieve since the women had different understandings about state terrorism, the role of the military junta and their ability to work within it, but this would change as the organization grew larger.

With vast differences in education, experience and political beliefs, a growing number of the Madres found themselves in desperate need for more information if they were to successfully confront the government and reveal the truth about the disappeared. Their ability to find answers through traditional political means, like the filing of *habeas corpus* documents, had proved to be

[104] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 20.
[105] Chelala, "Women of Valor," 68.

meaningless, and as such, the women were forced to expand upon possible alternative actions. Women began to purchase and share books related to economics, the School of the Americas in Panama, the methods of torture likely being used by the military, and other accounts of mass in-carcerations and torture.[106] The women used this knowledge to broaden their knowledge about the agenda of the dictatorship and the experiences of the disappeared. And as the women became more aware of the political realities of the time, the Madres began to develop more fully into a political organization.

While the most important political action that the Mothers would take would be the marches in the Plaza de Mayo, the Madres would employ a wide range of strategies in order to disguise their political actions and increase their political impact. Through the use of coded lan-guage, the Mothers attempted to prevent instances of repression, disseminate information, and avoid censorship measures in order to more effectively organize. With the division of the organi-zations into three different organizations that are often referred to ambiguously as the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" without clarifying which branch, the Mothers have been able to amass public support despite significant differences in the organizations' views and beliefs.

4.1 The Plaza de Mayo

Of all the things that the Mothers would do from their inception in 1977 – from their journeys to meet with foreign dignitaries and organizations to the later years of the Resistance Marches—, the most important action taken by the Madres will always be the marches in the plaza. But similar to Mothers have always prioritized themselves as an organization of concerned mothers before all other political considerations, the decision to go to the Plaza de Mayo was not a political one. As Matilde Mellibovsky commented

> It is true that we Mothers did not choose the Plaza de Mayo because it is itself a political center or because it is very close to Argentina's great political center, still… how very odd, something like destiny came about, because it is precisely in the Plaza de Mayo that

[106] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death*, 55.

very important events in the life of the country have occurred.[107]

Azucena Villaflor's decision to gather in the plaza in front of the Casa Rosada was driven simply by the need to be seen – "tenemos que ir a la Plaza de Mayo para que nos vean".[108] And while the women would be successful in their quest for visibility, the political importance of their decision to march in the plaza was overshadowed by the personal significance of what the plaza meant to the Mothers.

Before the Madres truly gained celebrity, the small group of women who met in the plaza found comfort in each other. The women could confide in each other about their disappeared children, united in their grief and their dedication to finding the disappeared alive. For some, like Nair Amuedo, the plaza became a sort of sacred space:

> Para mí la plaza era sagrada. Sabés por qué era sagrada? Porque era el único lugar donde yo me sentía bien. Porque con las madres, con la que te tocaba porque no te tocaba todos los días con la misma, éramos un montón, entonces con la que te tocaba nos poníamos a hablar de lo nuestro. A quién te llevaron, de dónde, cómo. En la casa, no podías, qué ibas a hacer. No podías llorar, no podías hablar.[109]

This sense of solidarity and belonging was an integral reason why the mothers were able to attract others to join them in their mission, and why the mothers continued to return to the plaza week after week. For many of the mothers, it is this feeling of solidarity and community that transformed the plaza from the Plaza de Mayo, the center of political activity in Buenos Aires, to "la plaza de las madres, la plaza donde volteamos un gobierno" as Carmen Lorefice has stated.[110]

Despite the sentimental significance of the plaza, the political importance of the Plaza de Mayo is impossible to ignore. Its physical location – "flanqueado por la Casa de Gobierno, el Ministerio de Economía, el Banco de la Nación Argentina, la Catedral Metropolitana y hasta el histórico Cabildo" – solidifies the plaza as center of Argentine culture and politics, both

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[107] Ibid., xiv.
[108] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 52.
[109] Ibid., 62.
[110] Ibid., 69.

metaphorically and literally.[111] With the decision to march in the plaza, the Mothers' demonstrations in plaza were significant for two reasons. Not only were the Mothers the first organization to protest the disappearances in Argentina, they were also the only organization willing to defy the government in such a direct and public way.[112] And the Mothers soon began to acknowledge how significant this action was. Nora Cortiñas, one of the founders of the Madres, has commented that, "Para las Madres de Plaza de Mayo la acción fuerte era la plaza, y la calle."[113] While their decision to take their search to the Plaza de Mayo may have been undertaken with the sole goal of increasing visibility in order to receive answers about the disappeared, the Madres' marches in the plaza became emblematic of defiance and commitment to the disappeared in spite of the legitimate possibility of repression.

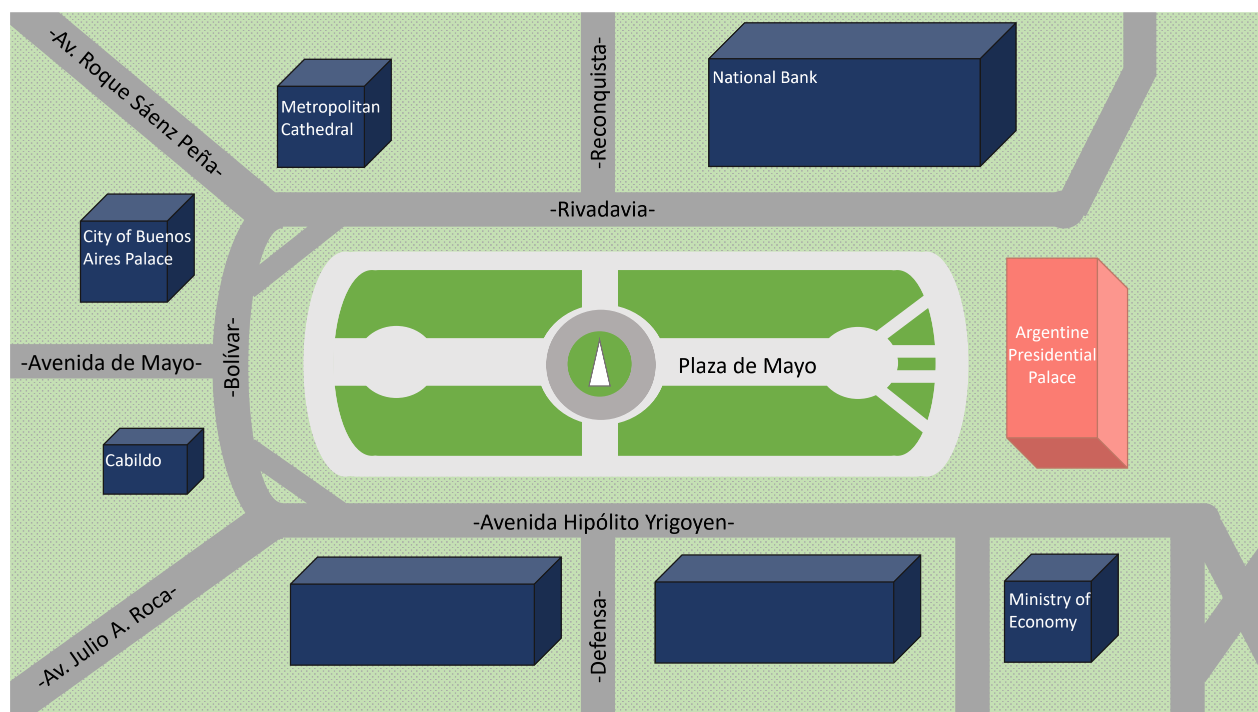

Figure 2 The layout of the Plaza de Mayo

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[111] Ulises Gorini, *La Rebelión de las Madres: Historia de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo,* Tomo I: 1976-1983 (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2006), 64.
[112] Navarro, "The Personal is Political," 251.
[113] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 82.

Another important factor in the Mothers' decision to go to the Plaza de Mayo, and their ability to consistently organize mass protests, is the accessibility of the plaza itself. The infrastructure existing in Argentina at the time was such that it was easy to travel to from various parts of the city, and even the country. Clara Weinstein, one member who used the bus system to get to the Plaza de Mayo, has commented on how the use of public transportation facilitated her integration into the Mothers stating "tomé el colectivo 64, bajé en la plaza, crucé la calle y vi a madres que todavía no habían empezado a dar vuelta con los pañuelos y me fui conociendo con las del [colectivo] 76, 77."[114] The bus system was the most popular way for the Mothers to travel and provided the additional advantage of incentivizing new connections with other Madres who gathered at the same bus stops.

Other members of the Mothers utilized the city's subway system in order to more easily travel to and from the plaza. With the Plaza de Mayo being the terminal station of the A Line, the subway was an easy and quick way for the Mothers to get to the plaza, and in some cases, escape from danger. María del Rosario Cerruti is one such member of the Madres that found herself in a difficult situation one Thursday:

> Una vez cuando salimos de la plaza y vamos a subir en el subte dos tipos que estaban parados ahí también se suben con nosotras. Canas, ya dimos cuenta enseguida. Con María Adela dijimos: 'No te muevas de la puerta, quédate del lado de la puerta porque en la primera estación que podamos salir, saltamos del subte'.[115]

The ease of access to the plaza also contributed to the ability of the mothers to avoid persecution. The quicker it was to get in and out of the plaza, the quicker it was to get out of potentially dangerous situations like Cerruti's.

The final way in which the Mothers were able to get to the plaza was through the use of the country's train systems. The Madres have branches across Argentina in cities like Rosario,

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[114] Ibid*.,* 66.
[115] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 71.

Tucumán, and Neuquén, and many of these cities are too far for the women to come every Thursday to the plaza. But in some cases, members of these branches were able to travel by train into Buenos Aires. Perhaps the branch that was most easily able to do so is the branch of Madres located in La Plata, a city located roughly two hours from Buenos Aires by train. In La Plata, the women attempted to raise awareness of the disappeared in their area by mimicking the demonstrations in the Plaza de Mayo but with a few important differences. Laura de Rivelli disclosed that in La Plata, the Mothers met in the Plaza San Martín on Wednesdays rather than Thursdays "so that those who could, would be able to go to the Plaza de Mayo on Thursdays."[116] And indeed many would attempt to make it to the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday. One of the most recognizable members of the Madres to do so is Hebe de Bonafini, the president of the Mothers who took the two-hour train into Buenos Aires nearly every Thursday in order to attend the demonstrations.

The demonstrations in the plaza were so effective for two reasons. Firstly, the Madres were able to take over the Plaza de Mayo, one of the most important political locations in the country, every Thursday at the same time. Their marches were extremely consistent and predictable. It was well known that the Mothers would gather in the plaza every Thursday at three, and this simultaneously made them more visible and facilitated new members to join the Madres as they knew exactly when and where to go after their child had been disappeared. Secondly, the plaza was easily accessible. The ability to use multiple modes of transportation effectively in order to quickly travel back and forth to the Plaza de Mayo made truly massive protests possible. The consistency of the Mothers' demonstrations and the accessibility of the plaza in this urban location are two important factors that promoted the Madres' ability to produce effective, mass demonstrations to raise awareness of the *desaparecidos* and demand answers.

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[116] Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (Boston, MA: Sound End Press, Institute for Social and Cultural Change, 1989), 96.

In other cases across Latin America, consistency and access were hard to achieve. While not all countries have locations similar to the Plaza de Mayo, organizations of the disappeared were not always able to demonstrate at a consistent time in a consistent location that was easily accessible to its members. In El Salvador, the Comadres took on a slightly different method than the Madres in order to make themselves visible. Rather than gathering in a public location, the Comadres began to "take" churches, government offices or other locations. The purpose of this was "not only to take the place in a non-violent way but also to make sure that it was full of people, especially children. This way, they became our 'hostages,' and through them we acquired some strength to make the government hear our voices."[117] They also participated in sit-ins and while they were consistent in that they occurred every two weeks, the locations were constantly shifting. Many would occur at the San Salvador Cathedral, other sit-ins would take place in front of the U.S. Embassy or the Ministry of Justice. [118] While the lack of consistency did not necessarily impact the visibility of the organization, it did make it more difficult for women to approach the Comadres as it was difficult to know where they would be protesting next.

In Guatemala, the issue of access proved to be a difficult problem for the members of the Mutual Support Group (GAM). With a large number of disappearances occurring in rural areas, GAM found itself struggling to successfully integrate its rural and urban members and organize events that were easily accessible to all members. As a result of difficulties in communication due to the lack of phones in the countryside as well as difficulties in transportation, GAM found itself isolating a large number of its rural members with urban members in Guatemala City emerging as the ones that organized and led the organization. [119] This is a clear contrast with the Mothers of Argentina where members from various areas and cities were able to efficiently

[117] Acosta, "The Comadres of El Salvador," 135.
[118] Ibid.. 133.
[119] Frank M. Afflitto and Paul Jesilow, *The Quiet Revolutionaries: Seeking Justice in Guatemala* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2007), 133.

travel from one area to another and where leadership, as in the case of Hebe de Bonafini, was not negatively impacted by distance.

4.2 Codes and Secrecy

As the Mothers and Grandmothers faced increasing amounts of scrutiny from the junta with their rise to popularity, it became necessary for the women to take additional steps in order to protect themselves and their mission. The disappearances of Azucena Villaflor and the other Madres was an unforgettable lesson about trusting outsiders and keeping meetings and other details of the organization a secret. One of the easiest ways to do this was through the establishment of a codes. The women began to establish codes for various aspects of their struggle including the names of other members of the organization, the locations of meetings, and the disappeared themselves.

For Mirta Baravalle, common nicknames became a simple yet effective way to preserve one's identity and protect themselves: "Nosotras nos identificábamos como 'la gordita, la morochita, la alta, la flaca'…. No necesitábamos decirnos nada. Uno prefería a veces no escuchar porque era como debilitarte, eso de no contarnos quizás para preservarnos."[120] These nicknames, so normal and seemingly inconsequential, served as an easy way for the women to make it just slightly much more difficult for the government to find out which member the Madres were talking about. However, these nicknames were not very complicated, and it was not difficult for the government to figure them out.

As a result, the Mothers attempted to create less obvious codes, using excuses about shopping or knitting to establish a secret meeting. Yet even these codes were easily deciphered, not necessarily because of the government's ability to decode them, but because of the inability of the women themselves to always keep them straight. Carmen Aguiar de Lapaco recalls how

[120] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 73.

the women struggled to keep the codes straight:

> We knew that the phones were tapped and we wanted to use a code so that they wouldn't find out which house we were going to meet in. We had agreed on names of hotels or tea rooms – to say "we are going to meet for tea at the Sheraton," for instance, or at any of those places; but our naiveté was such that there was always somebody who would suddenly pop up and say: "Is the Sheraton so-and-so's house?"[121]

And this naiveté was widespread amongst the Madres. Matilde Mellibovsky recalls how the Mothers would use the codes in front of the police, believing that the police would never doubt their plans to shop for random things like swimsuits. [122] Despite their initial lack of discipline in their use of codes, the women continued to develop them until they were able to use them effectively.

The Madres and Grandmothers established codes and expanded them to the point of having whole conversations with them. In some instances, the codes being used were quite random. The Grandmothers started by establishing a simple code to refer to various people and groups: "'The White Man' was the Pope; the 'pups' or the 'notebooks' or the 'flowers' were the children; the 'girls' or the 'young ones' were the Mothers of the Plaza; and the 'oldies' or the 'old aunts' were themselves.[123] However this simple code was used to have entire conversations without fear of anyone understanding. The women were able to meet in public locations, like coffee shops or bakeries like Las Violetas and talk with fairly little fear: "Sólo nos sentábamos en una mesa y conversamos calladito porque allí podía estar alguien escuchando. Entonces los niños eran las flores… 'las flores se secaron', 'las tuve que tirar'(…) Se hablaba de una manera que nadie se daba cuenta."[124] While the establishment of a distinct and effective code system was valuable for the women when used in daily conversations, when used in letters to communicate with

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[121] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 145.
[122] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 85.
[123] Rita Arditti and M. Brinton Lykes, "The Disappeared Children of Argentina: The Work of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo," in *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children & Human Rights in Latin America* ed. Marjorie Agosin and Monica Bruno (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1993), 169.
[124] "Interview with a member of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (2).

members of the organization in other cities or even other countries, the codes sometimes lost their effectiveness.

In some cases, the codes being used in the letters were unknown to the women reading them and with no one to clarify what they meant, the women were forced to guess at the answer and figure it out on their own. [125] But more problematic was when government censorship measures ruined the efficacy – either by destroying the letter itself or confiscating it as a prize of sorts. Hebe de Bonafini recalls how often these efforts were nullified:

> Some of the Mothers who helped us lived abroad and we maintained contact with them, although their replies used to arrive in an envelope with different handwriting, with an Argentine postmark and with the letter torn into little pieces. Our coded poems circulated among the exiles and militants. I found [one] to María Eugenia many years later, framed and hung on the wall of a living room in someone's house.[126]

While it was certainly disheartening, overall, the codes proved to be valuable to the organizations in their ability to protect the identities of the organizations' members, discuss important details of the disappearances and organize future events and meetings.

Such a widespread and extensive database of codes was not utilized as heavily among other organizations in Latin America. In El Salvador, "codes" existed insofar as the women choosing to have work names rather than use their legal names. But in contrast with the Argentine case, the Comadres used these names in preparation for one worst-case scenario. According to María Teresa Tula, work names existed in order to avoid one thing: "If [the government] ever gets a hold of you and finds out the last names of the people you work with, they will go and look for their families."[127] While this tactic was valuable in avoiding repression, it did have one problem: Unlike the Madres where the women knew the names of their companions but used coded nicknames to protect themselves, the women in El Salvador had no such knowledge.

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[125] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 54.
[126] Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared,* 74-75.
[127] María Teresa Tula, *Hear My Testimony: María Teresa Tula, Human Rights Activist of El Salvador* trans. Lynn Stephen (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), 132.

While the women in Argentina were able effectively combine their involvement in the Madres with their personal lives, in El Salvador, the women seemed to have established a strictly work relationship with one another, in which all business was conducted at the Comadres office, annihilating the need for a more extensive network of codes but also inhibiting their ability to communicate with other members outside of the office setting.

4.3 Multiple Divisions yet Single Identity

Despite eventually forming three separate organizations – the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Founding Line and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo – the women that gathered in the plaza have often been referred to as a singular organization, simply the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In 1977 when the first split occurred, the women in the Mothers and the Grandmothers were not intrinsically different. Both organizations wanted the disappeared to return, and wanted answers from the government, the Grandmothers just had an additional concern in searching for their missing grandchildren. The organizations continued to march together every Thursday and many members of the Abuelas continued to remain as members of the Madres. In this way, it is not entirely surprising that the women who met in the plaza were just referred to as the Mothers regardless of whether or not they also participated in the Grandmothers. However, following the 1986 vote and subsequent division into the Association of Mothers and the Mothers – Founding Line, the conflation of the two organizations becomes more politically significant.

When the organization held the vote for president in 1986, the women were divided in their beliefs about the emerging democracy. Generally, the two developing factions disagreed on a few issues in particular including economic reparations for the disappeared, participation with the CONADEP, the recovery and exhumation of the remains of the disappeared and the trials

developing against members of the junta.[128] When the vote came out and Hebe de Bonafini was elected president, the losing faction of the Mothers, led by María Adela de Antokoletz, decided that it would be best to form a separate organization. According to Laura Conte, the women in the group that would form the Founding Line felt rejected Hebe and believed that she had lost sight of what was most important:

> Nuestras madres de la Línea Fundadora son madres que Hebe rechazó, creo, porque no eran tan populares hablando desde el punto de vista de los sectores sociales. Eran madres casi todas universitarias, eran madres que de alguna manera tenían medios, familias con gente que había sido funcionaria en épocas históricas. Y eso, en alguna medida, a Hebe le rompía, porque no se daba cuenta de que nada era más importante que otra madre, que nada era más importante de los 30000.[129]

Accusations of classism and discrimination within the group were not uncommon and internally, the division left many hurt and bitter. Yet both organizations tried to maintain the image of solidarity for the public.

For many years, the exact reasons behind the division remained a secret. According to Aída Sarti, members of both organizations refused to talk about the issue publicly: "Durante 16 años nosotras no abrimos la boca sobre por qué fue el rompimiento, a nadie."[130] Despite this, the reasons were clear. The Mothers began to take different sides on political issues, and their approach towards these issues began to diverge. The Association of Mothers led by Hebe de Bonafini gained a reputation of being combative and more radical, while the Founding Line was seen as more peaceful.[131] At the same time, the support base for the two organizations began to separate as the organizations' positions began to fully develop.

While some of the emerging issues between the Association of Mothers and the Founding Line were quite personal, like the decision to exhume the bodies or not, other stances taken by

[128] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 157.
[129] Ibid., 156-157.
[130] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 156.
[131] "Interview with a member of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (2).

the two organizations were more relatable to the general public. In particular, the trials of military officials were highly controversial among Argentines. At first, Alfonsín's new democratic government pursued trials against the military leaders. The most significant trial was the Trial of the Juntas, which lasted 5 months and involved 711 charges against the leaders of the military junta and more than 800 witnesses.[132] At the end of the five-month process, five military officials were convicted while four others were acquitted. Despite mixed outcomes, the Trial of the Juntas was the first time that any Latin American country had successfully prosecuted its military officials for violations of human rights and the fervor for justice exploded.[133] The Founding Line was a staunch supporter of the trials while the Association of Mothers in some ways opposed it.

The members of the Founding Line were willing to accept any sign of progress. To them, the successful condemnation of some members of the military junta, or the discovery of the remains of one of the disappeared should be considered a victory: "Quisieron borrarlos para siempre y no pudieron."[134] And many Argentines felt similarly, believing that Alfonsín's progress may be slow (especially following the implementation of the Due Obedience and Full Stop impunity laws), but it was better than life under the dictatorship and offered hope for the future.

But for the members of the Association of Mothers, the trials and the recovery of the bodies gave the illusion of progress. The trials would only affect a few select members of the military and the exhumation of bodies would confirm the death of the disappeared but any sort of answers would end there. Elisa de Landin's son's body was found but Elisa remained unhappy:

> All I know for sure is that my son isn't here. Why did they kidnap him? Why did they kill him? So the Mothers continue to say that they're not going to recognize bodies until they know who is responsible. In spite of the fact I got mine, one of mine – until today I've found nothing about Horacio – I've never found out why Martín was killed and who killed him.[135]

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[132] Arditti, *Searching for Life,* 45.
[133] Terence Roehring, *The Prosecution of Former Military Leaders in Newly Democratic Nations: The Cases of Argentina, Greece, and South Korea* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2002), 68.
[134] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 151.
[135] Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared,* 130.

The Association of Mothers took a hardline stance towards their goals – they wanted all the answers about exactly what happened to their children, and they wanted justice to be doled out to each and every one of those involved in the disappearances, from the military to the church and even civilians. Further, they were willing to be combative in their desire to achieve this goal.

While the two organizations have very different views and approaches on how to treat the issue of the disappeared now that democracy has returned and have attracted different support groups as a result, the organizations are often just conflated jointly as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Both organizations still march in the Plaza de Mayo each Thursday although they do not necessarily march together as one. The organizations have the benefit of having two vastly different audiences and support while maintaining their identity as a singular organization in many ways. So the organization in practice has twice the level of support than would be suspected, simultaneously being able to appeal to radical and more conservative groups of Argentines without isolating either one.

This situation is unique among the organizations of the disappeared in Latin America. Very few of them experienced this sort of organizational division. The few organizations that did divided for different reasons. In Guatemala, the Mutual Support Group has experienced two divisions. The first occurred in 1989 when a group split off to form the National Coordinating Body of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA) while the second occurred in 1992 resulting in the creation of the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared (FADEGUA).[136] However, the first division was predicated by ethnic differences with the majority of CONAVIGUA consisting of Mayan peoples and the second division was driven by a corruption scandal.[137] Because these differences were in part driven by cultural and ethnic divisions that are more visible than

[136] Afflitto and Jesilow, *The Quiet Revolutionaries,* 133.
[137] Ibid.

political nature of the divisions within the Mothers organizations.

The split within the Madres would have presumably inhibited the success of the organization by weakening its stance on issues and fracturing its public appeal, but in reality, the division has had almost the opposite effect. The division has allowed the organizations to take a stricter stance on their political beliefs, inadvertently increasing their overall support by incorporating a wide range of the public due to the united front that the organization has. The divisions within the organizations are not insignificant and the animosity between the organizations is still present to an extent, the division has not been entirely negative and in fact, may have even benefit both organizations.

4.4 Conclusions

The success of the Mothers and Grandmothers with respect to their political actions as been a mixture of unintended luck and dedicated trials and error. Like their initial formation, the decision to demonstrate in the Plaza de Mayo was not intended to be politically charged but rather the simplest and most effective way to increase the women's visibility. Factors concerning the consistency of the demonstrations and the accessibility of the plaza to women from across Buenos Aires and the rest of Argentina contributed the growth of the organization, producing the mass gatherings of the Madres and facilitated the incorporation of new members.

As the organization developed and the political importance of their actions became clear, the Mothers recognized the need to formalize some of their practices, more effectively organize and avoid attempts at persecution. The creation of coded languages represents not only the acknowledgement of the Madres and Abuelas of the political nature and danger of their actions, but also shows the growth of the organization from naïve and innocent women with no political experience to an organization fully capable of challenging Argentine intelligence groups. Although the codes took time to perfect in order to more effectively reduce the risk of the

government decoding them, this system of codes proved to be an effective means of communication that allowed the Mothers and Grandmothers to communicate with each other in public locations as well as with other women across the country and in some cases, even outside of Argentina.

As the Mothers and Grandmothers became increasingly important political figures in the country, divisions began to emerge within the group about the future of the organizations and its political goals. With more details coming out about the true fate of the disappeared and the decreasing likelihood that they would be returned alive, the organizations faced a difficult decision: continue with the hardline stance that the organization began with in its brazen demand for truth and justice, or acknowledge that it is unlikely that the full details about the disappearances will ever be revealed and accept what few details that may emerge. These political opinions would eventually prove insurmountable, dividing the Mothers in two and resulting in two organizations that are simultaneously distinct yet united. As before, these actions, though political in nature, were not always pursued in the goal of broadening their base or strengthening the political power of the organization. Despite this, these political actions have undeniably contributed to the success of the organization in gaining popularity in Argentina and throughout the world.

CHAPTER 5

The Role of Outside Actors

Factors discussed in previous chapters have involved a combination of direct attempts by the Mothers and Grandmothers to increase their public appeal and visibility as well as events that unintendedly contributed to the organizations' success. This chapter diverges from this trend by discussing factors that were completely out of control of the organizations and yet still had a significant impact on their rise towards fame. In particular, this chapter will analyze how the Catholic Church, the Malvinas War and the internationalization of the Argentine democratization process, and United States' interventionism increased the visibility of the organization and contributed to its emergence and acceptance on the world stage as leaders of human rights.

5.1 The Catholic Church

In the latter portion of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church would adopt different approaches to deal with the political violence prevalent throughout the region. In some countries, the Church took a stance against state terrorism and attempted to aid those affected by the violence. In others, church officials were complicit in the violence. In the Argentine case, the Catholic church was divided in its approach to dealing with the disappeared. While there were some officials that would attempt to support the Mothers and Grandmothers in their mission, the majority of the time, the church did not help the women. At times, it even worked directly against them.

Catholicism is an integral part of Argentine life. Many women were raised in the church and brought up with religious beliefs. However, when the junta came to power and the disappearances began, the same churches that had been so welcoming to many women soon had a

change of heart. Josefina Galdalfi de Salgado was one of these women. As a deeply religious woman, Josefina sought help from officials at the church she regularly attended, as well as others, only to be deeply disappointed:

> I took the responsibility of talking to priests and bishops, and I suffered the worst letdowns in my life… I should have recorded the conversation I had with Monsignor Aguirre, Bishop of the diocese of San Isidro, to which we belonged. I left the Archbishopric sick. I believe that at the peak of the Inquisition you could not have found a harder and more insensitive inquisitor. I only wish God may have mercy on him.[138]

The Madres quickly realized that Argentine church officials were not sympathetic to their mission, yet many believed the highest member of the Catholic Church, the Pope, could still pressure the Argentine government and help the women find answers.

Amidst their letter campaigns and journeys to foreign countries, the Madres attempted to contact the Pope in order to inform him about the situation in Argentina. At times, the Pope's lack of response to the Mothers' letters could only lead some women to assume that the Pope knew about the *desaparecidos* and refused to act. Carmen Robles de Zurita's letters to the Pope and other members of the Catholic Church went unanswered: "I wrote to the Pope, who never answered, though he knew better than anybody else, and maybe was satisfied with this genocide being carried out."[139] While the Mothers believed that the Pope had to know about the disappeared given his status and power, the lack of response to their letters never confirmed the Pope's stance towards the situation.

However, as the Mothers continued to travel across the world in their search for help, a small group of women were eventually able to see the Pope after meeting with an Argentine bishop at the Vatican. Among the three women at the gathering, María del Rosario Cerruti had come prepared with a small offering to the Pope as a symbol of the Mothers' mission and the repression they had encountered. As she recalls, "Everyone gave him a cross or a religious card,

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[138] Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death,* 110.
[139] Ibid*.,* 67.

things like that. In my hand, I had a photograph of Azucena. As I raised my hands to give it to him he closed his fingers and wouldn't take the photo of Azucena. He didn't want me to give it to him."[140] The Pope's apparent refusal to help the Mothers was a great moral blow and yet the women continued to seek him out. They followed the Pope in his travels, flying to Brazil or Mexico in order to seek him out at public events. Eventually, their efforts paid off. While in Brazil, the Mothers had a brief meeting with the Pope who expressed concern for the situation being described and attempted to comfort the women, blessing them and assuring them that some of their children would return.[141] Unfortunately, Pope John Paul II assurance would not be true.

Despite the perception of making progress after meeting with the Pope, the Mothers continuously found the church to be complicit in the government's actions, at times even proactively working with them in their campaign against subversives. Many women found the church to have physically and metaphorically closed its doors on them. Not only did the Church deny them access and comfort, the Church denied them a place of sanctuary. At times, the Mothers sought refuge in the nearby Metropolitan Cathedral when the police presence in the Plaza de Mayo was particularly threatening. Each time, the results were the same: "When we ran into the cathedral for refuge from the police who were attacking us, they brought in the police to get us out."[142] For Mothers like Carmen Lorefice, the Church's actions during this time left many of the women with no faith in the Church or the priests:

> ¿Dónde estaban los curas? ¿Dónde estaban los curas en ese momento? Por eso la gente no cree más en los curas… Entraron como perico por su casa, vieron que estábamos ahí, porque nos corrieron y nosotros vimos que estaba abierta la Catedral y nos metimos adentro. Entraron con las bayonetas y nos sacaron.[143]

The lack of sympathy the Mothers received and the ease with which church officials were

[140] Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared,* 79.
[141] Ibid., 80.
[142] Ibid., 111.
[143] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 70.

willing to deny them sanctuary bolstered not only anti-Church sentiments among the Madres and Abuelas, it also reinforced that the best place to be for the women was with each other in the plaza. Unable to trust that the Church would protect them from the military and not welcome military officials in to arrest them, the Mothers saw the weekly protests in Plaza de Mayo as the most effective means to pressure the government rather than utilizing the Church and the Pope to bring about change.

The Mothers' anti-Church sentiments would only grow stronger as the truth about the Catholic Church's role in the disappearances. Church officials were not simply ignorant of the severity of the problem, nor were they forced to comply with the government's violent agenda. In many cases, they actively supported it. One official, Father Sabas Gallardo, stated that, "If the torture lasts more than forty-eight hours it is a sin", but within that forty-eight hour period, military officials were entitled to subject "subversives" to any means of torture it deemed necessarily, whether it be physical beatings, sexual violence or electric shock.[144] Other officials were more active in their support of the government's actions. Carlos González considered himself a modern-day inquisitor in a holy war intending to purify God's kingdom.[145] González would attend interrogation and torture sessions, passively sitting at the side of the room as the victim was tortured, his only words being "Hay mucha gente rezando por ustedes".[146]

With the Catholic Church supporting the junta's agenda, not only sanctioning the torture of the disappeared by also violating the sanctity of the church itself by allowing armed military officials to extract women seeking refuge within it, the Mothers and Grandmothers were greatly conflicted in their view of the church. Some women, like Vera Jarach, were cognizant of the

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[144] Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto: Argentina's* Desaparecidos *and the Myth of the "Dirty War"* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 193.
[145] Gustavo Morello, "Las Transformaciones del catolicismo en situaciones de violence política: Códoba, Argentina, 1960-1980," in *Las Iglesias Ante la Violencia en América Latina: Los derechos humanos en el pasado y el presente* ed. Alexander Wilde (Mexico City: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2015), 249.
[146] Ibid.

divisions within the church, acknowledging the church's complicity but also those who opposed the violence and were victimized as a result:

> Yo siempre digo que hubo dos iglesias, hubo una iglesia que fue víctima también, con muchas víctimas, y también hubo algunos obispos que con riesgo de su propia vida nos ayudaron. Eso existió, y fueron juntos. Estaba Puigjané que venía a la ronda con nosotros. Te quiero decir que había esa iglesia, pero también estaba la otra. Y esa fue la del silencio.[147]

However, in many cases, the women grew to resent and distrust the church.

Ironically, the Madres' inability to confide in the church may have inadvertently contributed to their success. Because the Mothers were unable to increase pressure on the military or to seek refuge when facing repression, the best option available to the Madres was to continue the marches in the Plaza de Mayo. Unable to hide, the Mothers had to publicly confront the regime at its center. The Church's complicity forced the women to become more visible to the public. And while the women may have been more likely to be subject to detainments or threats in the plaza, it is precisely this public display of defiance that allowed the women to become so recognizable.

Contrary to how it might seem, the assistance of the Catholic Church did not always benefit the organizations of the disappeared. In fact, in some cases, it may have even inhibited some aspects of their mission. In Chile, the Catholic Church adopted a firmer stance on their opposition to Pinochet's military regime. Led by Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez, the Catholic Church in Chile embraced human rights and dedicated itself to aiding those affected by the regime, including the family members of the disappeared. In 1976, Silva Henríquez established the Vicariate of Solidarity, an organization within the Church that provided legal services, economic support, and spiritual counseling as well as collect records and reports concerning the disappeared. However, as Wilde notes, the church's decisions had another important goal in mind – to

[147] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 77.

provide shelter for the family members of the disappeared:

> Más allá de crear la Vicaría, las autoridades de la Iglesia también tomaron otra decisión fundamental que solo se menciona de paso en la mayoría de los estudios, pero que demostró tener consecuencias mayores para la defensa de los derechos humanos: dieron espacio y abrigo a los familiares, fundamentalmente mujeres, que buscaban – y cada vez abogaban más – por sus seres queridos.[148]

By giving these family members a physical space, the church created a refuge for the family members that allowed their own human rights groups to develop.

In my interviews with the members of the Association of Family Members of Disappeared Detainees (AFDD), the importance of the Vicariate of Solidarity was obvious. The Church was where everything began: "Allí llegábamos todos. Allí se formó la Agrupación".[149] The members of the AFDD were able to gather in the church without fear of repression. The AFDD organized hunger strikes within the church in order to raise awareness about the disappeared in Chile. The efforts of the AFDD and the Vicariate of Solidarity were closely linked – the AFDD would continue to work in coordination with the Vicariate until 1990 when the Vicariate's mission closed.[150] Despite the Vicariate's ability to support the AFDD and protect them from repression, the AFDD's concentration within the church had two unintended consequences. For one, it reduced the public visibility of the AFDD, shrinking the impact of the hunger strikes and other protests employed by the family members. Secondly, it conflated the identities of the two groups – the AFDD was seen as a part of the Vicariate and the Catholic Church's efforts to combat the dictatorship.[151] As such, the organization was never able to attain a popular, individual identity among the Chilean public and the broader international audience, inhibiting its ability to promote change.

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[148] Alexander Wilde, "La Iglesia institucional y el ministerio pastoral: unidad y conflicto en la defensa de los derechos humanos en Chile," in *Las Iglesias Ante la Violencia en América Latina: Los derechos humanos en el pasado y el presente* ed. Alexander Wilde (Mexico City: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2015), 184.
[149] "Interview with two members of the Association of Family Members of Disappeared Detainees," Interview by Catherine Paige Southworth, May 30, 2018.
[150] Ibid; Chuchryk, "Subversive Mothers," 90.
[151] "Interview with two members."

The Catholic Church proved to be an important actor in Latin America during this period of conflict and violence. Whether it attempted to shield those affected by military regimes or to remain complicit in the government's actions, the Church altered the options available to the organizations of the disappeared as they began to mobilize. However, there was an apparent tradeoff. Refuge and shelter from repression came at the cost of organizational visibility. While it is impossible to determine how the organizations would have been affected differently if the roles of the Catholic Church had been reversed, what is clear is that church has the ability to drastically affect the visibility of the organizations of the disappeared, like the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the AFDD in Chile.

5.2 The Transition to Democracy

While the actions of the various organizations of the disappeared during the dictatorship shape the ability of the organization to make a space for itself and gain popularity, equally important is how the country's transition to democracy affected the options available to the organization. Some countries experienced unsteady and unclear transitions, limiting the organization's ability to take a harder stance against the government. In others, the return to democracy represented a clean break from the past with rights and freedoms being more universally accessible to the country's citizenry.

When Argentine forces invaded the Falklands Islands in 1982, the military was operating under the belief that a war over the islands they referred to as the Malvinas would have the combined impact of uniting the Argentine public, distracting attention from the struggling Argentine economy and legitimizing the power of the armed forces. And on some accounts, the junta's beliefs were correct. A wave of patriotism swept through the country, uniting Argentines in their shared struggle against Great Britain, the imperialist power they believed had wrongly taken the Malvinas from them. Citizens of different ages, political backgrounds and socioeconomic status

were united by the country's David-and-Goliath-esque undertaking and the public seemed to be coming together where it had before been divided over politics.

However, the Mothers and Grandmothers threatened this fledgling sense of unity. When the women appeared that Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo to continue their demonstrations regarding the *desaparecidos*, many felt they were betraying their country and their people. And the consequences of this perceived betrayal were severe. According to María del Rosario Cerruti, the hatred the women encountered that Thursday was palpable:

> María del Rosario Cerruti – Era la traición de las madres a las Malvinas. Nos insultaron, nos pegaron, nos tiraron por el suelo. Y nosotras volvimos el otro jueves igual. Nadie nos defendió, nadie nada. Pasaron, nos tiraron, nos revolcaron y se fueron. Pero salió en todos los diarios, yo tengo todavía guardado el panfleto ese.[152]

Although the women were regarded as traitors and continuously insulted and harassed, the Mothers dedication to their cause meant that their faces would be published in newspapers throughout the region as a symbol of continued defiance of the military junta. As the saying goes "All publicity is good publicity" and in this case, the Falklands War brought a lot of publicity to Argentina.

Given the nature of the Falklands/Malvinas War as an international conflict between Argentina and Great Britain, it was inevitable that international scrutiny of the Argentina and its regime increase during the war. But, the Falklands War captured much more than the attention of Great Britain. The U.S. was drawn into the conflict due to its conflicting ties with Great Britain as a historic ally and its growing relationship under President Ronald Reagan. All of Latin America was interested in how the war would play out and even the National Security Council of the United Nations became invested in the conflict.[153] With such high levels of international attention being thrust upon the country, the Mothers and Grandmothers had the opportunity to

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[152] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 137.
[153] Novaro and Palermo, *La Dictadura Militar,* 431.

interject their struggle onto the world stage.

At one of the gatherings in the plaza, the Mothers and Grandmothers would achieve this goal after one woman, Delia Giovanola, was photographed with a small poster that read, "Las Malvinas son argentinas y los desaparecidos también."[154] The photo became emblematic of the Mothers struggle during the Malvinas War. It simultaneously rejected accusation of that the Madres had betrayed their country by embracing the Malvinas Islands as an Argentine territory while also bringing attention back to the issue of the disappeared. It is exactly for these reasons that the war was so beneficial for the organizations even if they did not realize it at the time. Carmen Cobo commented on the importance of the Falklands War in helping the Mothers, stating that if it were not for the war, the Madres may have ceased to exist:

> Yo siempre dije que nos ayudaron las Malvinas, porque si no hubiera existido no sé si hubiera sobrevivido el movimiento de madres, lo hubieran aniquilado, ni el recuerdo hubiera quedado. Nos ayudaron las islitas. Esos hechos que vos ni te lo hubieras imaginado, quién se iba a imaginar que esas islas estaban ahí colgadas del mapa, separadas del continente, iban a tener un peso tan decisivo.[155]

With the attention that the Malvinas brought to Argentina and the realization that the junta was desperate to maintain control, the Madres knew that this was their "make or break" opportunity. And with additional events like the 24-hour Resistance Marches and successful publications like the ones about Delia Giovanola and her sign relating the Malvinas to the *desaparecidos*, the women could feel that things were about change.

[154] Ibid., 441.
[155] Las Madres, *Las Viejas,* 136.

Figure 3 The Madres during a Resistance March in December 1982

Just ten weeks after it began, the Falklands War came to an end on June 14, 1982. Argentine military forces had been quickly and effectively dealt with and the Argentines knew they could not come back from their losses. For the military junta, the loss was humiliating and represented a deathly blow to their credibility.[156] Knowing they would be unable to recover from the consequences of the war, General Leopoldo Galtieri quickly turned over power to General Reynaldo Bignone before the country announced it would be holding public elections and transitioning to a democracy.

The government's announcement was significant as it represented a clear and definite return to democracy in Argentina. The Argentine military had effectively lost all power and control and any power they retained was quickly stripped from them when Raúl Alfonsín was elected president: generals were forced to retire, civilians were appointed to oversee military operations and military funding was slashed in order to correct the country's budget.[157] With the military

[156] Roehring, *The Prosecution,* 51.
[157] Andersen, *Dossier Secreto,* 306.

effectively removed from power – at least for the time being – democracy flourished in Argentina. Trials were held, the disappearances were investigated by the CONADEP and human rights organizations like the Mothers and the Grandmothers could voice their opinions and demands without fear of repercussions. Argentina's 'complete' transition to democracy facilitated the establishment of democratic norms in the country, allowing human rights organizations to operate more freely.

While the speed and 'completeness' of Argentina's transition to democracy is not necessarily unique in Latin America, there are examples in the region where a slow and incomplete transition negatively affected the outlook for human rights organizations. In Guatemala, the country's transition to democracy took a full ten years from 1986 to the official peace agreement ended the thirty-six year civil between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) in 1996.[158] The difficulty and back-and-forth nature of this ten-year waiting period stalled efforts made by human rights organizations to pursue justice.

While the country supported the creation of the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), a truth commission similar to the CONADEP, in 1999 that found that 93 percent of the estimated 200,000 people killed or disappeared from 1960 to 1996 had been victims of violence committed by government officials.[159] Human rights groups like GAM, CONAVIGUA and FADEGUA chose not to pursue criminal cases at the time, believing that they would be more effective if they waited until the publication of the CEH report, the implementation of the Peace Accords and the democratization and overhaul of the Guatemalan judicial system.[160] Unfortunately, this situation would never come to pass. Guatemala has not effectively tried any military

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[158] Andrew G Reiter, "Measuring the success (or failure) of transitional justice," in *An Introduction to Transitional Justice* ed. Olivera Simić (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2017), 281.
[159] Raúl Molina Mejía, "Bringing justice to Guatemala: The need to confront genocide and other crimes against humanity," in *State Violence and Genocide in Latin America: The Cold War Years* ed. Marcia Esparza, Henry R Huttenbach and Daniel Feierstein (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2010), 210.
[160] Ibid., 219.

officials implicated human rights violations and part of the reason is related to the slow transition process that Guatemala experienced.

In Chile, organizations of the disappeared faced similar difficulties during their transition process due to its 'incomplete' nature. While the 1988 national plebiscite would lead to the official return to democracy with the election of President Patricio Aylwin, former dictator Augusto Pinochet would remain in power as the Commander-in-Chief of the Army until 1998.[161] While the government would establish a National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, known as the Retting Committee, Pinochet's continued control over the military loomed over human rights organizations. Pinochet was never successfully prosecuted before his death and members of the AFDD believe the inability of the country to pursue trials is related not only to the pacts of silence that military officials have and the idea that "la impunidad reina" but also the fear that many had that Pinochet would still be able to engender chaos and violence with his status as Commander-in-Chief of the Army.[162]

These two cases demonstrate how the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo benefit in their demands for justice, not necessarily for any particular strategies they undertook, but because of the circumstances of the country's transition to democracy. The internationalization of the conflict brought huge amounts on journalists and reporters to Argentina, facilitating the publication of the Mothers' missions but also eliminating all possibility that the junta could remain in power following their humiliating defeat. And because of this, Argentina's rapid and complete transition to democracy enabled to Madres and Abuelas to engage even more openly in their criticism of the government and their demands for answers, contributing to the 1985 Trial of the Juntas and the publication of the CONADEP report on the disappeared, *Nunca Más*.

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[161] Felipe González, "Human Rights and Democracy in Chile," in *Human Rights Regimes in the Americas* ed. Mónica Serrano and Vesselin Popovski (Hong Kong: United Nations University Press, 2010), 158-159.
[162] "Interview with two members."

5.3 U.S. Interventionism

The last international actor to have a significant impact on the recognition of the organizations of the disappeared is the United States. The United States has been involved in Latin America for decades, with foreign policies like the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary providing important guidelines about relations between the United States and other countries in the region. However, as U.S. economic interests in the region grew and ideologies concerns about race, development and democracy, the U.S. began a series of political, economic and military interventions in the region. One of the most important agencies employed by the U.S. in their interventions was the CIA which acted to train rebel groups, fund opposition and incite revolutions in order to ensure that U.S. allies were in power.

In the Cold War era in which concerns about the containment of communism were of the utmost importance to the U.S., Argentina found itself to be a bit of an exception in terms of U.S. interventionism. Unlike Chile or Guatemala where the CIA directly acted in order to overthrow Allende and Arbenz respectively, there is no evidence that the CIA was a key player in the overthrow of Isabel Perón in 1976.[163] However, this does not mean that the U.S. was not involved in the on-goings of the military junta. At the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Panama, the U.S. trained over 600 members of the Argentine Armed Forces in counter-insurgency and anti-Communist tactics.[164] Additionally, the CIA brought Brazilians, Argentines and Uruguayans together to the Department of Public Safety in Los Fresnos, Texas where it would teach them tactics such as wiretapping, bomb-making and even arranged for the transfer of explosives and untraceable guns.[165] The U.S. knew about the military's difficulties with the Montoneros and the ERP and the US was willing to support their military's efforts to annihilate the perceived

[163] Andersen, *Dossier Secreto,* 14
[164] Ibid*.,* 248.
[165] Ibid., 114.

problem.

In fact, the U.S. made their support of the junta's use of violence explicitly clear when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger traveled to Argentina and met with Argentine Foreign Minister César Augusto Guzzetti. According to the testimony given by Ambassador Robert Hill, "Kissinger asked how long it would take… to clean up the problem. Guzzetti replied that it would be done by the end of the year. Kissinger approved. In other words, Ambassador Hill explained, Kissinger gave the Argentines the green light."[166] But, the support came with a warning – the military should expedite the violence in order to avoid repercussions from Jimmy Carter, who would be inaugurated in January 1977, only a few months later.[167]

The Carter administration presented a threat to the indulgent nature of the Nixon administration. Carter's commitment to human rights became obvious during the campaign. In debates with Gerald Ford, Carter highlighted the need for human rights reform in the US and highlighted Chile as one of the most important places to carry out this reform.[168] Despite this initial dedication to Cuba, after his inauguration in 1977, Carter would look to Argentina as the ideal test case for his new human rights policy. Inspired in many ways by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's Law Day speech at the University of Georgia in April 1977, Carter highlighted the establishment of the rights of people to be free from government actions affecting their integrity, such as torture and arbitrary arrests.[169] With the prioritization of rights affecting the integrity of the person, Carter's human rights policy could be applied to disappearances occurring throughout Latin America and would be one of the primary sources of conflict between the Carter administration and the Argentine government in the years that followed.

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[166] Ibid., 21.
[167] W.M Schmidl, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy Toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 53.
[168] Anderson, *Dossier Secreto,* 250.
[169] "Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC 28 - Human Rights". *Jimmy Carter Library*. 1978. https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/memorandums/prm28.pdf.

Carter would employ a variety of tactics in order to attempt to reduce the number of human rights violations occurring in Argentina. Patricia Derian, the newly-selected Coordinator for the Bureau for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, was to investigate accusations of disappearance and torture. Derian met with human rights groups like the Permanent Assembly on Human Rights but also with the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In particular, she had a fondness for the Mothers, meeting with them in the U.S. Embassy, telling them that they deserved a Nobel Peace Prize and even establishing a support group in the U.S. for the Mothers after leaving office in 1981.[170] Additionally, Derian collected reports and data on the disappeared. As a result, when President Carter and Secretary of State Vance met with President Jorge Videla over the years, the two would provide lists of the names of the disappeared to Videla, requesting answers about their status.[171] Videla never provided them.

While it is difficult to know for certain whether the U.S. was able to more readily acknowledge the disappeared due to their more limited involvement and intervention, what is clear is that the U.S. was clearly more willing to acknowledge the human rights situation in Argentina and meet with the organizations of the disappeared. Patricia Derian's attachment to the Mothers is of particular importance. As the Coordinator for the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, one of the primary focuses of the Carter administration, Derian was an influential actor in Washington. By establishing the Friends of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Derian ensured that the organization would gain attention in the United States, further cementing the organization as one of the most recognizable from Latin America.

In contrast, the AFDD received little attention from the United States. While this could be due to the organizations' general lack of visibility due to their semi-seclusion within the church and other factors previously mentioned, in interviews with members of the AFDD, the women

[170] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances,* 161.
[171] Schmidl, *The Fate of Freedom,* 133.

seem sure that U.S. involvement in the overthrow of Salvador Allende and the rise of Augusto Pinochet to power contributed to their lack of recognition. Again, while this is difficult to prove, it is not an entirely outlandish argument. It is easy to condemn something that you had no hand in creating. In Argentina, the U.S. could easily acknowledge the human rights violations and the organizations that resulted while not implicating themselves. In Chile, this was not the case.

5.4 Conclusions

The role of foreign influences on the recognition of organizations of the disappeared in Latin America is complex. The Catholic Church, the involvement of international actors in the country's transition to democracy and the involvement of the U.S. in bringing about the military regime itself are all factors that are completely out of the control of the human rights groups that developed in the aftermath of the disappearances. Members were forced to work around the restrictions placed upon them – whether that be the inability to seek refuge in the church, or a ten-year transition to democracy that stalled all attempts at justice. In some cases, the organizations were able to use their circumstances to their advantage. In other cases, circumstances that seemed to be advantageous to the organization may have ultimately impeded its success.

Overall, the impact of international actors is difficult to summarize in short. In the case of the Catholic Church, the initial protections provided by the church in sheltering victims and their family members can come at the cost of visibility. But visibility, with the lack of support from the church, increases the likelihood that the organization suffers repression as a result, as was the case for Azucena Villaflor and dozens of other mothers who were detained by police simply for their involvement in the Mothers and Grandmothers. The tradeoff is difficult to access but for Argentina and Chile, the Madres and Abuelas would ultimately benefit greatly from their enforced visibility while the identity and visibility of the AFDD may have suffered.

With respect to the involvement of international states in the host country of the

organizations of the disappeared, the intentions or actions taken by the foreign actor may be the most important predictor of its influence on recognition. In instances where foreign involvement was explicit and open – as in the case of the influx of reporters and international scrutiny during the Falklands War or U.S. oversight of Argentine human rights abuses during the Carter administration – international actors may be able to promote the recognition of the human rights organizations by providing them with an outlet for their concerns and their mission. However, in instances of clandestine involvement, like U.S. and CIA involvement in Chile and Guatemala, recognition of human rights organizations runs the risk of betraying the actor's involvement in the first place, negatively affecting their reputation and image.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

Overall, it is difficult to identify the single most important factor that contributed to the rise of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo to international celebrity. While the Madres and Abuelas share a multitude of characteristics with other organizations of the disappeared throughout Latin America, such as the prioritization of female involvement and public demonstrations, significant differences between the countries make comparison difficult. This essay in no way provides a definitive answer as to why the Madres have become famous but it does intend to offer a preliminary analysis of some of the unique aspects about the Argentine women's rise to fame.

While the success of the Madres can in some ways be examined by looking at the ways that gender and feminism, political considerations and outside actors affected the organization's power, we can also subdivide all of these factors into two broad categories: mutable and immutable factors. The mutable factors refer to the conscious decisions made by organizations in the search for the *desaparecidos.* In this case, male exclusion, the adoption of the handkerchief, the journey to the plaza, the use of coded language and the political divisions of the Mothers are all examples of decisions the Mothers knowingly made and chose to enact as they developed as an organization.

On the other hand, there are several immutable factors that the Mothers played no role in creating these factors and instead could only adjust under the circumstances. These factors include the history of feminism in Argentina, the gender roles intrinsic in Argentine culture, the Catholic Church's complicity in the violence, the internationalization of the Malvinas War and

the intervention (or lack thereof) of the United States. These Mothers and Grandmothers are incapable of altering any of these factors but adjusted as well as they could to suit the needs of their mission.

When divided this way, one might question whether the success of the Madres is a product of their conscious decisions, or their environment. And in some ways, there is no counterfactual of an organization that made the exact same decisions as the Madres and Abuelas that exists in another Latin American country to prove the importance of the environment. But there are other examples within Argentina proving that these immutable factors cannot be the only considerations in the Mothers' success. Similar organizations within Argentina, like the Association of Family Members of the Detained-Disappeared for Political Reasons, HIJOS, the Association of Former Detained-Disappeared, and the Siblings of the Disappeared, and yet they have also have not achieved the international recognition to the same extent as the Mothers and Grandmothers. This suggests that the immutable factors, while they may play a role in the fame of the Argentine Mothers, cannot be entirely responsible for the uniqueness of the Madres and Abuelas.

Similarly, there is no way to isolate the conscious decisions made by the Mothers. The various organizations across Latin America have a variety of differences, making it impossible to determine which factor among the immutable factors might be the most important. While the organization's female-only configuration and the adoption of the handkerchief are two of the most emblematic aspects of the organization, it is unlikely that these two decisions are the sole determinants of the organizations' success.

In conclusion, the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Founding Line and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, three separate organizations that are often collectively referred to as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo for their joint demonstrations in the Plaza de Mayo, have emerged as a unique case within Latin America. The

women have been internationally successful in their quest for the recognition of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina and their demands for justice. While there are a multitude of factors contributing to the success of the organization, including the influence of gender and feminism, political considerations and the role of foreign actors, it is impossible to contribute their success to one singular factor. Instead, the Mothers have emerged in part due to the conscious decisions they made to emerge as figures to be listened to, and in part due to the environment they found themselves in. In all the confusion, the Mothers themselves are not particularly concerned with the reasons that they have emerged as figureheads among the organizations of the disappeared. Their only concern is with the *desaparecidos*, and until they can discover the truth about their fate, they will continue to march every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo.

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